



NORTHERN EXPOSURE

There is frozen, unworldly beauty to be found in the Arctic ice of Svalbard, Norway's northernmost frontier

WORDS ALEX VON TUNZELMANN | PHOTOGRAPHS PHILIP LEE HARVEY

The *Noorderlicht*, close to Tempelfjorden on the island of Spitsbergen. The ship remains locked in ice for several months of the year



A husky pictured by the *Noorderlicht*. Huskies are still integral to life here in Svalbard, helping make travel possible in often extreme conditions

‘In this strange and unknowable land, the huskies are not afraid’

An old mine outside of the settlement town of Longyearbyen. Abandoned machinery from the Cold War era lends the landscape an eerie, haunted quality

IN the Arctic blizzard, there is nothing but white. White above, white below, white in every direction. It is impossible to know whether the view ahead stretches for 10 yards or 10 miles. Into this void, undeterred, run the six huskies pulling the little wooden sled, tongues lolling and tails flailing wildly. No glimpse can be seen of the sled in front, but the dogs are following the scent of their pack. In this strange and unknowable land, they are not afraid.

The sled bumps and skids over an undulating sheet of ice, frozen thick over the waters of a fjord. The blizzard slows and, for the first time in hours, the distant outlines of mountain ridges can be made out: just a suggestion, like the first few sketches of charcoal on an artist's blank canvas. Then, suddenly, out of the white, there is a mast. Two masts. It's a lone sailing ship, frozen in the middle of a vast sea of ice, which promises warmth, comfort and the best hot chocolate north of Murmansk.

Travelling on a dogsled to a ship frozen in the ice is a journey with resonance. It echoes the beginning of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, in which an Arctic sea explorer gets stuck in pack ice near the North Pole and finds the exhausted Dr Victor Frankenstein pursuing his escaped monster. In real life, too, the great 19th-century explorer Fridtjof Nansen found his

way to these seas in his specially designed ship, the *Fram*. Expeditions would sail as far as possible towards the poles in the summer, then let the waters freeze around them, creating a supply base. Nansen later gave the *Fram* to Roald Amundsen, who used it to set out for the South Pole.

There is only one place in the world where it is possible to stay on an icebound ship now. That's the *Noorderlicht* (Northern Light), frozen for winter in Tempelfjorden on the island of Spitsbergen, in the high Arctic Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard.

In the cosy wooden interior of the *Noorderlicht*, thick thermal suits are peeled off and the dogsledders' extremities slowly defrosted with hot chocolate. Ted, the laconic Dutch captain, appears briefly. 'I planned to retire on a yacht in the Caribbean,' he says with a wry smile, gesturing at the iced-up porthole. A hearty dinner is served, with spinach pastries, meatloaf and deliciously moist apple cake. Then, at last, the sled team collapse into their bunks inside and the huskies collapse into their kennels outside for a night of much-needed sleep. Poor Dr Frankenstein could be hammering on the cabin doors all night and nobody on board would wake up to let him in.

When morning comes, the storm has gone. The sun will not rise over the horizon for several hours – but, in the first violet glow of morning, it is finally possible to see

the whole sweeping expanse of Tempelfjorden itself. This is why people come to the poles: a 360-degree sight of bizarre, ethereal beauty like nothing else on Earth. It's a landscape on the sweeping scale of the African savannahs or the deserts of Asia, but rendered in cut crystal. The ship is in the middle of an enormous winter plain created by the rippled ice, which is frozen solid across the seawater. A pale, hazy mist clings close. For a second, a black spot appears in the distance: a seal, popping its head up through a hole to take a look around. Barren mountains sheer up from the faraway edges of the fjord, their black crags softened by thick drifts of pristine white snow. And it is, of course, silent; silent in a way that only a windless place with no trees, grasses or insects can ever be. That is, until the huskies wake up and start barking for breakfast.

In the days of Norwegian explorers Nansen and Amundsen, ships and dogs were the only way to travel in the polar regions. A century on, snowmobiles are a faster option – and, though they do break down occasionally, they usually need less maintenance than six dogs. And it's a relatively easy matter to climb a glacier on a snowmobile. The snow fills the mountain passes in meringue-like heaps, light sparkling on its smooth crust. Occasionally that crust crumbles under the snowmobile's tread, and both driver and vehicle tip ►



‘A couple of thousand people call this archipelago home’

Longyearbyen, just visible beyond two small peaks, is the adoptive home to a surprising number of nationalities – 26 in total. Many residents are Thai

over and are buried. Beneath the crust, though, the snow is soft and powdery – making falling into it oddly enjoyable. It's like tumbling into a pile of marshmallows.

The air is a brisk -28°C today and tears freeze solid on eyelashes. Even so, zipped up in a hi-tech thermal suit, it is possible to be plunged into a snowdrift and feel no more than refreshingly cool. The snowmobile is soon dug out and back on track. Skimming over the drifts once more at 50mph, it would be easy to assume that this wilderness has been conquered.

It has not. Our guide, Martin, calls for a break by an abandoned mine, an eerie collection of deserted buildings on the side of a deep valley. Parents in Spitsbergen tell their children that this place is home to Yule Nisse, a gnome from Norwegian folklore and local variation of Father Christmas. Martin takes out a large, high-calibre rifle. He loads it carefully – it's not magical Christmas gnomes that have him worried. 'I like to keep the gun ready,' Martin explains, 'because often you don't see a polar bear until it's too late.' Tragically, Svalbard made the news in August of this year for exactly that reason. A polar bear attacked an expedition camp,

wounding four people and killing 17-year-old British student Horatio Chapple.

Poignantly, Chapple was named after Admiral Horatio Nelson, who, legend has it, attempted to hunt a polar bear in Svalbard in 1773. Nelson, then a 14-year-old midshipman, was armed only with a rusty musket. He fired at the bear, but the gunpowder flashed and the bullet stuck in the barrel. 'Never mind,' he cried, 'do but let me get a blow at this devil with the butt-end of my musket, and we shall have him.' The ship's captain fired a shot into the sky, one version of the story goes, and the bear fled.

As the awful events of August proved, the danger of bear attacks has not gone away: as long as there are bears, they will never be completely avoidable. Yet Svalbard's guides are never blasé about the risks – like Martin, they are all armed. Despite its breathtaking beauty, the Svalbard winter is hostile. Aside from the bears – which outnumber humans by three to two – residents and visitors must contend with enormous distances, poor means of communication, strong winds, frozen seas, ice storms and, of course, the extreme cold. The temperature in the largest settlement, Longyearbyen (the world's northernmost town), falls as low

as -46°C, and only remains steadily above freezing between June and September. Nonetheless, a couple of thousand people choose to call this archipelago home. You do not need a visa or even a passport to live here and, as a result, the human population is diverse, comprising 26 different nationalities – from Russians to Indians, Swedes to Chinese. There was an Iranian here until last year, too – a refugee from political persecution in his own country. After Norwegians, the biggest group is Thai. 'Thirty years ago, a Norwegian from Svalbard fell in love with a Thai woman,' explains Lisa, a guide in Longyearbyen. 'I guess word got around.'

Walking through Longyearbyen – a cluster of pretty, multicoloured wooden houses buried deep in the drifts – it soon becomes apparent that the word did indeed spread. 'I was looking for work abroad and it was easier to apply here than anywhere else,' says Lek, a Thai cleaner who moved from Bangkok to Longyearbyen 10 years ago with her daughter. 'But I really like it. Last year I married a Norwegian, too.' Patricia, a Peruvian who runs a sports boutique, doesn't seem quite so sold on the cold. 'I didn't know there would be no flowers,' ▶



Lek, originally from Bangkok, has lived in Longyearbyen for 10 years. BELOW Coloured wooden houses in Longyearbyen



Jayakumar, a technician from Malaysia and fellow Longyearbyen resident. ABOVE A reindeer treading through deep snow.



‘As the sun sets, the landscape is plunged into cobalt blue’

In the winter, when the sun makes just a fleeting appearance in Svalbard's skies, the ice can take on a range of intense colours



she says. ‘And no trees. I’ve been here six years, but it is a nice place to live. Especially in March – that’s my favourite time of year.’ Jayakumar, a Malaysian technician, has no such mixed feelings. ‘It’s so cool,’ he says, with a massive grin. ‘The best part is snowmobiling. And in summer, with the long hours of daylight, it’s a party all the time.’

It isn’t far from Longyearbyen to the Arctic wilderness: in fact, it’s just around the corner. Just 20 minutes from the town by snowmobile, up in the mountains, the sky has clouded over. There is perhaps no landscape on Earth so profoundly changed by the light as the frozen poles. Under flat grey clouds, the landscape looks starkly monochrome, without any hint of colour: nothing but pure white snow and sharp black rocks. Then, when the light glows softly around the clouds, it comes to life.

The flat, endless white is transformed into a fairytale scene of sugared-almond pinks, lilacs and turquoises. When the sun peeks over the horizon, the colours intensify. The edges of the clouds become fiery gold smears. The snow glows peach. At one point, there is a patch of sky visible

between slate-grey clouds that is the exact colour of crème de menthe. Then, as the sun sets, the whole landscape is plunged into a deep, moody cobalt blue – the beginning of a long winter night.

BEYOND the mountains is another town, so different from Longyearbyen it feels like another world. Back in the early years of the Cold War, Svalbard was the setting for a face-off between the Soviets and the Norwegians, both of whom built settlements here. Though Norway was awarded sovereignty over the archipelago in 1920, Svalbard’s status as a demilitarised and free economic zone allowed the Soviets to maintain a substantial mining operation throughout WWII and the Cold War. From the 1950s through to the 1980s, the Russian population here was about twice the size of its Norwegian counterpart.

The most striking relic of those times is Barentsburg, a Russian mining base that can only be reached from Longyearbyen

after several hours on a snowmobile. These days, half of Barentsburg is a ghost town. Deep in the winter snow, it’s hard to tell which half.

Abandoned buildings are painted with peeling murals of well-fed cows, a legacy of Soviet efforts to start farms in this unlikely location. There are monuments dedicated to over-achieving workers. A bust of Lenin glares down over the settlement, his face half-covered in snow. A few hundred people, mostly Ukrainians, still live here, but it feels like the frontier of a disappeared world, frozen in time.

The Soviet town runs along the edge of a wide fjord and we set off across it in a convoy. We speed up through a mountain pass, bouncing over heaps of powdery snow. The glow is fading from the sky. As the convoy heads west into the dying light, an ice storm descends. In the headlamps, the shower of ice sparkles like millions of falling diamonds. It is a captivating sight. The red taillights of the snowmobiles in front are all that can be seen. However, the ice is falling fast, and even these lights soon disappear behind a crystalline veil. Now all the drivers can do is follow the tracks, ▶

'Isfjord has a small place in the heart of everyone in Svalbard'

Spitsbergen's remote west coast is home to a former radio station, a team of huskies, reindeer, Arctic foxes and polar bears

hoping that in the middle of this endless, whirling torrent they are heading in the right direction. Soon enough, three yellow lights glimmer through the veil. This is Isfjord Radio, a former radio station that was once the only way people on Svalbard could communicate with mainland Norway. Enormous satellite dishes relayed signals and Norwegian television was recorded and replayed 24 hours later for the local population – who were, therefore, consigned to live perpetually in the past.

TECHNOLOGY has moved on since then and the radio station is no longer in use. Instead, it has become a hotel – complete with a library, a long-wave radio receiver in every room and a menu of Svalbard delicacies, such as Arctic cod, reindeer and whale.

Just four people live on this side of Spitsbergen, and they all work at the hotel. Fredrik and Lena are the cheerful young couple in charge. They were offered a three-year contract to live in this otherworldly place on the shore of a frozen sea, with nothing for miles around. Why did they take it?

'First of all, because this place is amazing,' says Fredrik. 'There's a lot of history. Isfjord has a small place in the heart of everyone in Svalbard.' It is the uniqueness of Isfjord that made it so irresistible, Lena adds. 'There was nothing to think about. Of course we would take the job.'

Their great passions are hunting and fishing. 'A reindeer provides a lot of food for us and for our dogs,' Fredrik explains. 'But the rules are very strict on hunting here. It's not like the Wild West.'

In the warm, cosy lounge, sipping red wine and reading a book while the Arctic storm swirls outside, it's not hard to see why Fredrik and Lena look so contented. 'It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity,' Fredrik remarks. A visit to Svalbard is just that: an unforgettable encounter with a strange, beautiful and alien world. 

Alex von Tunzelmann is a British author and historian. Her latest novel is *Red Heat: Conspiracy, Murder and the Cold War in the Caribbean* (£25; Simon & Schuster).

 For more about the extraordinary Arctic, watch David Attenborough's series *Frozen Planet*, showing now on BBC One and iPlayer.

