

# Travel & Outdoors

<b>TRAVEL</b>	<b>34</b>
Island idyll	
<b>OUTDOORS</b>	<b>37</b>
Little dipper	
<b>GARDENS</b>	<b>38</b>
Maximum impact	

*Soak up the midnight sun in Svalbard and experience one of Earth's great wildernesses*

**ROGER NORUM**

While I rarely read the fine print on anything, a few days into my trip to the North, I thought to glance at the adventure outfit's website. I had just hiked about a permafrost landscape strewn with antlers and whalebones, where my guide's German shepherd was fetching rocks - not sticks - and engaging in staring contests with a trio of portly reindeer. The day prior, I had sat in the bright sun on a pebbly beach opposite soaring, snowy mountains and dined on campfire-cooked ox gruel and fjord-chilled Prosecco, before donning a massive orange drysuit and floating around in near-frozen waters. And now, on [www.basecampexplorer.com](http://www.basecampexplorer.com), one sentence in particular caught my eye: "If you are experienced in the use of weapons, you can set off on your own and experience the area." If it hadn't been crystal clear before, it was now: this was no run-of-the-mill holiday.

The lion's share of people, when planning a once-in-a-lifetime journey to the Earth's extremities, will settle on Antarctica. They'll save up masses of holiday time, spend upwards of £10,000 and endure weeks on a rugged expedition icebreaker to get there. But Europe has its own polar wonderland: the Svalbard archipelago. A trip here is effectively a journey to the ends of the earth - a glacial island 640km north of the Norwe-

gian mainland and 1300km from the North Pole where the soil freezes to depths of 500m and the completely dark winters can drop to minus 70C with wind chill. There are no roads here in the land of extremes: one drives snowmobiles, boats and aircraft to get around.

And yet Svalbard is a devastatingly gorgeous place to visit, especially in the warmer months, when the midnight sun shines above a Bergman-esque landscape and the Arctic opens itself up to curious visitors. I doubt if Norway has ever been marketed as a budget alternative to anything, but if you consider that Svalbard lets you effectively see the Himalayas and the (Ant)arctic with a quick flight from the UK, the world's most expensive country might well be in the running for the bargain of the century.

In the archipelago's main harbour of Longyearbyen, six of us suit up in waterproof and buoyant Helly Hansen E-352-4 Offshore Survival Suits, outfitted with double-welded seams, lifting straps and an emergency beacon inside the collar - just in case. Our brawny guide, Martin, speeds us south out of the harbour in his Zodiac as the snowy peaks of the Isfjord mountains glisten under a brilliant sun.

A few hours later, we pull into the makeshift dock at Cape Linné on Sval-

bard's western coast, loomed over by a massive radio tower and a dilapidated satellite dish. Established in 1933, the Isfjord Radio Station was the sole telecommunications link between Svalbard and the Norwegian mainland. When underwater fiber optics laid 70 years later outmoded the station overnight, Norwegian adventure company Basecamp Explorer re-envisioned the settlement's half-dozen buildings as a remote, rustic-

## Two walrus pop their heads up out of the water

chic base for explorations into the Arctic wilderness. The 23 swish, blue-grey rooms are done up with exposed wood, large comfy beds, goatskin blankets and driftwood sculptures, with high-powered binoculars that await you at the window sill (the station looks out over a protected bird area).

Early the next morning before embarking on a safari, I muster up the bravado to run out into the icy fjord waters for a few minutes or until I can no longer feel my toes, whichever comes first (it is

the latter, about eight seconds into my swim). Other mammals fare somewhat better, I discover. Later, as we are propelled across the still fjord in the Zodiac, two adult walrus pop their heads up out of the water just ahead of us. "Well, I guess that's Mother Nature saying good morning," Martin says as he shuts off the engine and motions to us to whip out our binoculars and DSLRs. The walrus bob their heads at the surface, somersault back into the water, then appear elsewhere on the fjord a few seconds later - these beasts can hold their breath for a full 40 minutes under water.

Martin slaloms us in and out of the drift ice towards Trygghamna, a quiet, snowy pocket of the fjord which attracted French, Dutch and English whalers during the 16th century. We clamber down from the boat and delicately walk out on a small plank of slushy glacial land, where a bearded seal is lazing about a hole in the ice and looking onto the Kjerulfbreen glacier as he catches some rays.

In addition to an extensive knowledge about Arctic wildlife, Martin carries something else rather less inconspicuous with him - a single-barrel shotgun.



Abandoned coal mining buildings in the Isfjord mountains, main; drysuit swimming, below left

PHOTOGRAPHS: ROGER NORUM





A polar bear skin on the wall of the lodge sitting room at Isfjord Radio, left; Martin the guide with his Ruger rifle, above; a Svalbard reindeer on the permafrost, below

As the world's most northerly settled land, Svalbard easily lends itself to notching up your bedpost with geographic superlatives: most northerly kebab; most northerly naff souvenir shop; most northerly place in the world where you can walk around in a hoodie and carry a gun and never get a second look from anyone. Island law requires you to carry a rifle anywhere outside of Longyearbyen – a constant reminder that somewhere out there lurks *Ursus maritimus*, the common, hungry polar bear. Sadly, the only one I saw was splayed out and hanging on a wall in the lodge's lounge.

We hike up across the permafrost towards the bird cliffs of Alkhornet, where the umber land undulates in tussocky patches of Arctic poppy, polar willow and saxifrage – flora that take advantage of the long periods of midnight sun to compensate for the polar nights. We kick back at the cliff's base to catch some sun ourselves, the squawk of Brünnich guillemots, fulmars and petrels breaking the Arctic silence high above us.

One evening, during a scrumptious dinner of pork and duck rilette with capers and a garlic aioli, followed by beef fillets with roast potatoes and Bernaise sauce, we meet a group of ten Norwegian volunteers who have spent the week helping toawl, saw, lathe and paint several of the buildings at Isfjord Radio into tip-top shape. "When I was here for the first time," Hilde, a fortysomething volunteer who works as a schoolteacher in her real life, tells me, "I was crying on the flight back to Oslo because I thought

that I might never come back." Where else but under a social democracy with 56 weeks of paid maternity leave and a public oil pension fund worth some £350 billion would you find otherwise gainfully-employed professionals volunteering their time to build up someone else's private company? Clearly there is something magical about this far-flung land that lures people in – and holds them tight. Though we spent just four days hiking and beachcombing the wilds of Svalbard, everyone left with the uncanny sensation that the passage of time had slowed down for us – as though Mother Nature had decided we all deserved a little more repose up here.

Sometime around midnight, I glance outside. A heavy mist has shrouded a pair of distant mountains, but the sun is still shining high in the sky. Some of the Norwegians have left the dinner table to sit outside with their guns, and are sipping on strong coffees as they gaze out towards the horizon. I ask Martin, who trained with SAS forces as a sniper and then sailed the Atlantic for ten years, why he's decided to settle all the way up here, so far away from the world. "Freedom," he tells me. "That sense of freedom. I love it. When you grow up in the North, it stays in you."

**THE FACTS** *The Basecamp Isfjord Radio summer adventure tour costs from 10,930NOK (£1,225) pp excluding flights. Visit [www.basecampexplorer.com](http://www.basecampexplorer.com); Scandinavian Airlines ([www.flysas.co.uk](http://www.flysas.co.uk)) offers return fares from London to Longyearbyen via Oslo starting from £345, there are also daily flights from Edinburgh and Aberdeen; Abercrombie & Kent ([www.abercrombiekent.co.uk](http://www.abercrombiekent.co.uk)) can tailor-make trips including flights; a 16-night cruise from Rosyth to Spitsbergen & The North Cape starts from £1,579pp. Connoisseur Cruising is also offering up to £160 onboard spending money, if you book now for 2012, tel: 0131-625 6330 quoting "Scotsman".*

Visit [www.holidays.scotsman.com](http://www.holidays.scotsman.com) for more great holidays



# Little big island



*Take a ferry to a weekend of peace, quiet and pleasure on the Isle of Arran*

JOANNE KIRKHAM

**K**nown as Scotland in miniature as it boasts both highlands and lowlands, the Isle of Arran holds a special place in my heart, and over the years I've spent many family holidays here.

With two about to become four as I was expecting twins, the opportunity to spend a relaxing weekend in one of Scotland's most beautiful places sounded blissful. And where better to stay than at the Auchrannie Resort, in Arran's main port of Brodick, five minutes' drive from the ferry terminal.

As soon as you step onto Arran you feel like you're thousands of miles away from the mainland, instead of less than

an hour from Ardrossan by Calmac ferry. I'm not sure if that's island life in general or some magic that Arran possesses. But it is very special.

The long wooded drive at Auchrannie leads to the two hotel buildings, set amid acres of mature grounds. The original Auchrannie House hotel, a country retreat, sits next to the more modern Auchrannie Spa.

Rooms in the original part of the house, where we stayed, are generally smaller in size, but retain period features and charm. Rooms in the newer wing are larger and generally chosen by families. There are also four ground floor bedrooms, one of which is fully

# 48 HOURS IN Traverse City, Michigan

- **Friday, 3pm** Check into Chateau Chantal, a winery and 11-room bed and breakfast on the Old Mission Peninsula. A queen-size room costs from £130 ([www.chateauchantal.com](http://www.chateauchantal.com)).
- **5pm** Savour Asian specialities at Red Ginger ([www.eatatginger.com](http://www.eatatginger.com)).
- **7pm** Catch the Nauti-Cat catamaran ([www.nauti-cat.com](http://www.nauti-cat.com)), which is docked at the Holiday Inn, West Bay. It runs a romantic Champagne Sunset Cruise along the bay.
- **10pm** Raise a craft brew at Jolly Pumpkin Artisan Ales on Old Mission





Auchrannie Spa Hotel, left; the hotel pool, above; one of the rooms, below



adapted for guests with disabilities.

Friendly staff showed us to our room, which had an amazing bay window from which we had a view to Goat Fell, Arran's highest peak.

With its Scottish baronial facade and soft contemporary interiors, the Spa blends traditional values of service and quality with modern style, seeing itself as the "funky little sister" to the main hotel.

As we were on a pampering break, we had booked a treatment each. I opted for the pre-natal full body massage which was an hour and a half of pure bliss. This total body treatment has been carefully designed for pregnant and nursing mothers

and it left me feeling like I was floating on a cloud. Afterwards I had to reassure my husband that any herbs used in the oils and creams were perfectly legal; I think I looked a bit too relaxed.



He opted for the men's facial which was a completely new experience for him. He approached it with dread, but as his face was scrubbed and massaged he relaxed enough that he fell asleep and began snoring on a couple of occasions during the hour-long process. As we were advised to relax and allow the creams and oils to soak into our skin, we took this excuse to give the pool and the gym a miss and have a nap before dinner.

Auchrannie has three restaurants. Eighteen69 is the flagship and boasts a silver EatScotland award. It is complemented by Brambles Seafood Grill, which is also in the main hotel. Cruz Bar and Brasserie, in the spa resort building, has great views of Glen Cloy and is open daily for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

We had a lovely dinner in Brambles, and the attentive staff, roaring fires and fantastic views added to the relaxing atmosphere of the restaurant. We enjoyed delights such as pan-seared king scallops and garlic king prawns on wilted pak choi with sweetcorn and spring onion salsa, and chargrilled lamb chops with sweet potato gratin, balsamic glazed shallots and a pan jus.

The next day we made our way back to Brambles for a hearty breakfast. A table laden with cereals, fresh fruit, pastries, fruit juices, fresh bread and local cheeses and preserves greeted us as we entered the room, and I also ordered a cooked breakfast - made with local produce - as, of course, I was eating for three.

As the weather had cleared up, we took the opportunity to drive around Arran, and headed north to Lochranza in search of deer, a pretty much guaranteed sight up in that area of the island. Lochranza also has a ferry terminal, where a smaller ferry operates in the summer, and in my opinion makes the trip to Arran seem even more special.

Inspired by the seals basking on the rocks and playing in the water, we decided to return to the hotel and try out one of the pools.

Our last day arrived and reluctantly we packed to leave. We may have missed our ferry on the way over (another story, for another day) but the thought of missing the ferry home seems far more appealing. It's difficult to leave somewhere so beautiful, that in such a short space of time, can feel like home.

**THE FACTS** A return crossing for two adults and one car from Ardrossan to Brodick costs from £82.20, visit [www.calmac.co.uk](http://www.calmac.co.uk); summer family packages at Auchrannie Resort start from £185 per room per night inc B&B, visit [www.auchrannie.co.uk](http://www.auchrannie.co.uk); new this year is the 300sqm farm yard themed Playbarn with indoor and outdoor play areas, catering from toddlers to teens; Brightwater Holidays offer a four-night break to Arran from £425pp, visit [www.brightwaterholidays.com](http://www.brightwaterholidays.com) or tel: 01334 657155 quoting "SC".



Visit [www.holidays.scotsman.com](http://www.holidays.scotsman.com) for more UK holidays

# Bargain Breaks

COMPILED BY ALICE WYLLIE

## TREASURED ISLAND

A seven-night stay in Zante costs from £350pp. The price includes accommodation at the three-star Hotel Petros in Tsilivi on a bed and breakfast basis, and return flights from Glasgow departing on 14 July. Call 0844 879 8200 or visit [www.manos.co.uk](http://www.manos.co.uk)



## BULGARIAN BARGAIN

Prices for seven nights in Bulgaria start from £504pp. This includes accommodation at the three-star Meridian Centre Hotel in Sunny Beach in a superior room on a half-board basis, and return flights from Edinburgh departing on 18 July. Call 0844 412 5970 or visit [www.thomascook.com](http://www.thomascook.com)

## BLANC CHECK

Save 15 per cent on a ten-day trek of Mont Blanc. Prices start from £646pp for the tour which departs from Chamonix on 18 August. The hiking circuit will take in views of glaciers, steep valleys and Mont Blanc itself. The price includes all tour transport and accommodation as well as selected meals, but does not include flights. Call 0871 230 8552 or visit [www.statravel.co.uk](http://www.statravel.co.uk)

Peninsula ([www.jollypumpkin.com](http://www.jollypumpkin.com)).  
**■ Saturday, 10am** Check out the boutiques in the charming Suttons Bay area ([www.suttonsbayarea.com](http://www.suttonsbayarea.com)).  
**■ Noon** Visit Grand Traverse Lighthouse ([www.grandtraverselighthouse.com](http://www.grandtraverselighthouse.com)), and have a swim in Lake Michigan.  
**■ 2pm** Tackle the sand mountain at Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore ([www.nps.gov/slbe](http://www.nps.gov/slbe)).  
**■ 4pm** Sample the local fruit, with a glass of cherry wine and a slice of Cherry Blossom Lime Cake, at Cherry Republic ([www.cherryrepublic.com](http://www.cherryrepublic.com)).  
**■ 5pm** Sup on whitefish at The Manitou eatery, which borders the National Park ([www.themanitourestaurant.com](http://www.themanitourestaurant.com)). Save room for pie at the Cherry Hut - a

favourite since 1922 ([www.cherryhutstore.com](http://www.cherryhutstore.com)).  
**■ 8pm** Watch a movie through the windshield at the Cherry Bowl Drive-in ([www.cherrybowldrivein.com](http://www.cherrybowldrivein.com)).  
**■ Sunday, 8am** Face The Bear's club, the Jack Nicklaus golf course at the Grand Traverse Resort ([www.grandtraverseresort.com](http://www.grandtraverseresort.com)).  
**■ 1pm** Enjoy brunch at Amical ([www.amical.com](http://www.amical.com)), before heading home.  
**GEORGE ZIMMERMANN**

**THE FACTS** Flights from Edinburgh to Pellston start from £905 ([www.skyscanner.net](http://www.skyscanner.net)). Pellston is 69 miles from Traverse City, so hire a car at the airport ([www.pellstonairport.com/transportation-8/](http://www.pellstonairport.com/transportation-8/)).



Chateau Chantal; a gallery at Suttons Bay, inset