

Set sail for a long weekend in the Arctic

POLAR ADVENTURE

On a wooden schooner, James Stewart briefly touches the earth's most raw, fragile wilderness

In Svalbard anyone can become a citizen. Get an address at Longyearbyen, prove you've the funds to support yourself and you're in. It's that easy. What you're not allowed to do is die. Something to do with tricky burials in permafrost and no cremations 650 miles (1,050km) from the North Pole. I mention this because Rasmus Jacobsen, the softly spoken owner-captain of our schooner, Linden, spent the first moments of my cruise enumerating the ways in which to come a cropper. You could go overboard (hypothermia within five minutes) or get brained by one of the ship's spars (someone releasing the wrong brown rope). Easy to do when they're all brown.

RACE TO THE POLE
Out and about in Svalbard, below, the wooden schooner, Linden, above right

If you were lucky the last thing you might see was one of Svalbard's 3,000 polar bears – a hazard during trips ashore, expedition naturalist Mette Eliseussen warned. A bear cannot be outrun by a human. A serious confrontation usually ends in death for one party. Get on the wrong side of the world's largest land carnivore and, well, Mette had a tough rifle-shot. We 10 passengers giggled. Mette scowled. She wasn't joking.

Wasn't that why we were here, though? Not for the death part, obviously, but for the adventure? I wanted to do more than just look. I wanted to hoist sails and climb rigging. I wanted to experience the Arctic if not quite on equal terms, then not cocooned from it by a large ship.

Previously, that required a hefty time commitment. Now you can do it over a weekend on a three-day sailing cruise of Svalbard. You board at Longyearbyen on Friday, mid-afternoon, and disembark late on Sunday. Catch the red-eye back and, depending on where you live, you can be at your desk on Monday morning.

It sounded implausible and a bit intrepid and also intriguing. The ultimate adventure quick fix. Could it offer anything more than fuel for Instagram?

Having read about Linden – the largest wooden three-mast schooner sailing in Europe, I expected something ersatz. Instead, with sails bagged on yards and bowsprit, and tarred rattines up three masts, this 160ft recreation of a 1920 Finnish cargo trader was nicely salty. Within was a cottage saloon and seven en suites (two singles share a bathroom) with bunk beds. Being a Danish ship, there was also a sauna and a bottomless urn of coffee.

Discover the World, on whose itinerary I was sailing, proposed a sail west. The wind suggested we go north. Fine by me – I also wanted, if only briefly, to be a windblown vagabond at nature's whim.

As we left Longyearbyen's fjord Rasmus told me about his time sailing on tall ships in the Caribbean. He bought Linden "to do something more interesting".

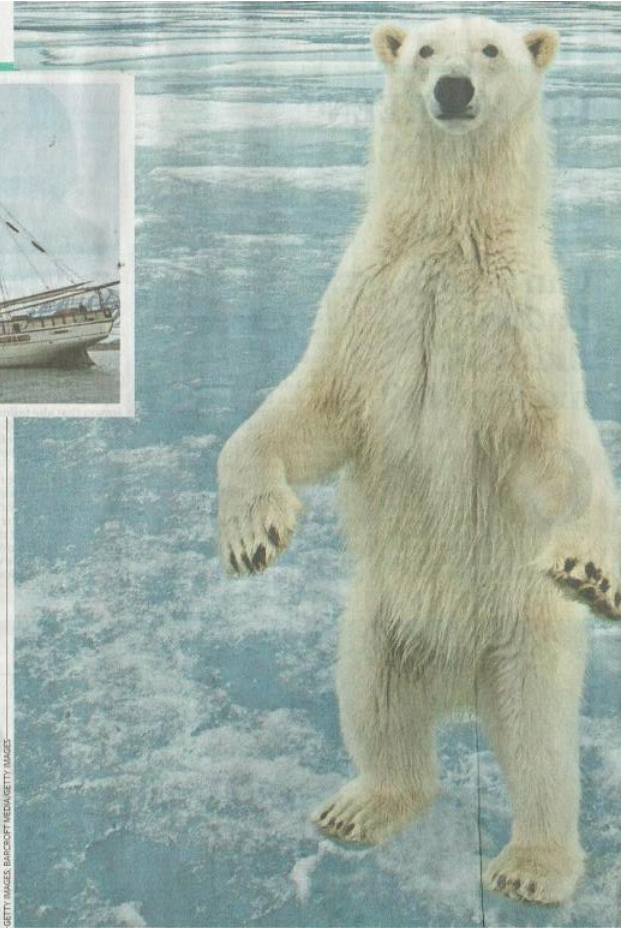
"Instead of being a nuisance we come a bit more gently. We ask what we can do to help the environment and local people," he said. I nodded. But I wasn't really listening. There was too much scenery to take in.

No purple prose, no statistics, no photograph prepares you for a first encounter with the polar wilderness on a small ship. It's vast. Imagine the scale of the Arizona desert. Submerge it and add ice. You're not even close.

We motored between snow-streaked mountains buttressed by scree and turreted by cliffs. Across one horizon a meringue whip of peaks glittered in the luminous light. Over three days I never quite got used to the visceral punch of stepping from the saloon's embrace into such raw wilderness.

Amazing – but not entirely what we came for. Wildlife was why we were here and it appeared within the hour – a polar bear that had sniffed out a whale carcass. It leaned a paw – that could bludgeon a walrus senseless with one swipe – on the whale's head, chewing only the blubber that could sustain it for four months, then waded into the sea, paddling in circles in water that would freeze a man in minutes. Overheating is a bear's second biggest problem. The biggest is climate change.

Many of us were here to sail, too. The sails went up in a blur of salty terminology – sheets, gaffs, peaks – that left my palms stinging. You don't



have to climb the rigging afterwards, but it seemed a shame not to. The idea was to maintain three points of contact, I was told. Good call – the rattines wobble as you ascend. But what a view: billowing canvas, blue-black sea, mountains to infinity. At 11pm we docked in brilliant sunshine at Pyramiden. Russia abandoned this northerly mining town in 1998. Now gulls nested on window ledges of derelict apartment blocks

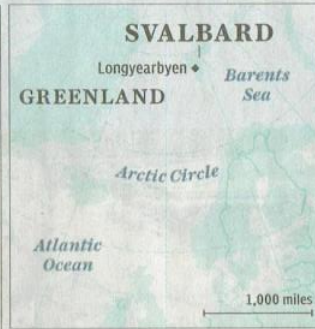
ADMIRING THE VIEW
One of the 3,000 polar bears in Svalbard, main; on deck, right

and Arctic foxes skittered past the old cultural centre, where a pink granite bust of Lenin craned its gaze towards Moscow. It looked like an apocalypse film set.

Yet Pyramiden isn't entirely abandoned. It is inhabited by eight people, three or four of them year-round. That made summer – with a brace of guides and passing tourist ships – party time. In Pyramiden's seasonal hotel I joined some in the bar.



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A QUIET REVOLUTION?

Official figures show around 62,900 cruise passengers visited Svalbard in 2018, going ashore in close to 200 locations. Compare that with 20 years ago: 12,000 people, 50 locations. The polar wilderness is in danger of being loved to death. Is impact-free tourism impossible in somewhere this fragile? It's hard to say. But Linden may be the most sustainable model of polar cruising yet.

It could even be an asset for residents.

On our trip we delivered petrol to a remote hunters' cabin. Had they asked for it? No. "It's more rewarding to give without expecting anything in

return," said Linden's captain. "People start to treat you as a human being, not as a money machine."

In the galley on board, cook Denis grows vegetables and bean sprouts for meals (excellent, incidentally) not just to experiment with polar gardening, but to nudge passengers to rethink their attitude to sustainable nutrition. Mette, the naturalist, talked of including Arctic plankton one day – a protein-packed super-food. If this sounds preachy, it's not. It's a quiet revolution in one of the most vulnerable environments in the world.

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A hammer and sickle plaque hung above vodka bottles. For the barman, Kiril, from Moscow, this was a summer job. He had no plans to stay. There was no Wi-Fi, or phone signal. He missed his friends. I asked how many weeks he'd been there. "Two days."

Such settlements are very Svalbard, too, Mette said. "There are very few of these really isolated places you can

Linden nosed through brash ice into a bay of beaten silver. Whiskered like a Habsburg grandee and as rotund, a bearded seal slid past on a floe. After the anchor chain rattled down there was silence, but for the dull boom of a glacier calving beyond the bowsprit.

From the RIB, Nordenskiöld glacier appeared chaotic, carved by wind, weather and time. For up to 10,000 years it had poured around inland mountains, the top slipping faster than the bottom to tear the ice into crevasses with cracks like gunshots. Now, at the sea, it came to a messy end, exposing an iridescent teal core, littering the surface with glassy chunks that released air captured before Christ was born. It sounded like popping bubble wrap.

We bobbed beneath wheeling fulmars and kittiwakes and a marauding skua. There was a sudden gasp and a white barrage balloon emerged. Then another. And another – a pod of around 20 beluga whales. They feed on fish and crustaceans at the glacier's edge. While the glacier tumbles into the sea, the ecosystem spins. But Svalbard's glaciers are retreating ever faster. What happens when they don't reach the sea? Well, it's anyone's guess.

On our final morning we walked across a shoreline of flame-orange lichens and bleached whale vertebrae into a minuscule forest – the polar willow might be mere centimetres tall but it's the world's toughest tree. Reindeer grazed the tundra ahead. Svalbard reindeer are yet to associate humans with danger. Anything smaller is generally lower in nature's pecking order. We sat. Two came and assessed me with huge eyes. It was quite a moment.

I lingered; enjoying the silence, watching the fulmars soar, the icy mountains gleam and the sea shift from steel to pewter and back. If polar wilderness demands anything of us it's that we be quiet for a while. You can do that on a sailing ship. You yield to your surroundings. You have to, really. Without even realising, you internalise Rasmus's unspoken message about polar sustainability – and fragility.

I've had less fulfilling fortnights away than my three-day trip. There's also a five-day option, which I urge you to make time for. I'm envious already.

James Stewart was a guest of Discover the World (01737 886131; discover-the-world.com). The three-day Sailing Svalbard's Glacier Coast cruise costs from £2,030pp, including return flight from Heathrow to Longyearbyen via Oslo and one night at Basecamp Hotel. A five-day cruise costs from £3,345pp. For more information visit www.discovertheworld.com

