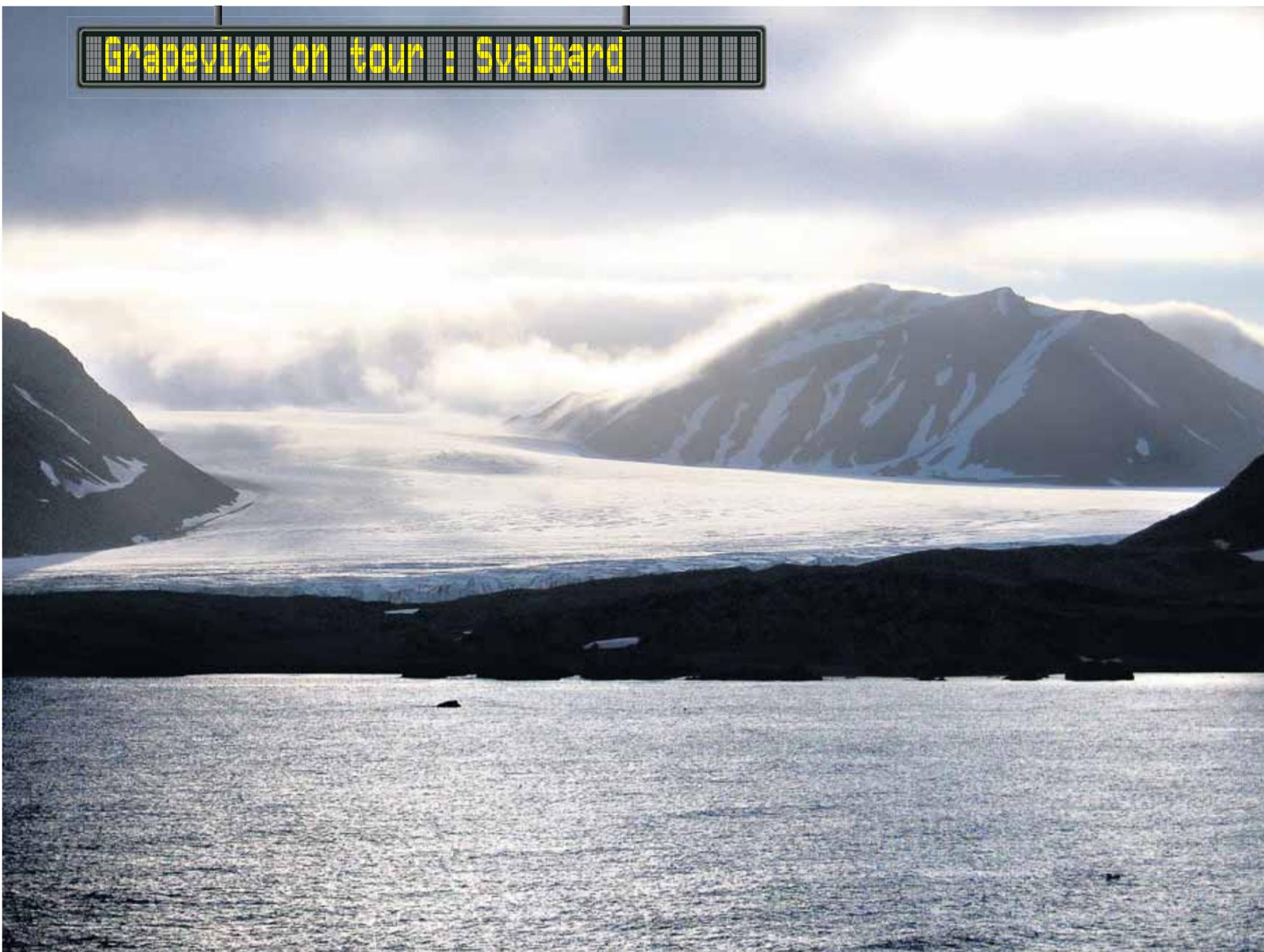


Grapevine on tour : Svalbard



Beware: Polar Bear May Bite

Guns but no roses in Svalbard

BY IAN WATSON PHOTO BY IAN WATSON

I had never been on cruise ship in my life before I spent three weeks last summer giving lectures on the North Atlantic aboard the *Prinsendam*, a Dutch ship carrying mostly North American passengers. I wasn't paid for my work, but the trip was free, and I was allowed to bring along a guest. The other passengers were friendly, and I was scandalously overfed, eating piles of fresh pineapple every morning and nightly five-course dinners. But the high point of the cruise was getting to see two very special places in the high Arctic: Svalbard and Jan Mayen.

The "capital" of Svalbard is Longyearbyen, not named after anything having to do with its many weeks of summer daylight and winter dark, but rather after an American coal mining entrepreneur named John M. Longyear who founded the town in 1906. Approaching ships take the broad Isfjord in from the sea, make a right turn into the smaller Adventfjord, pass the airport and pull up at the pier. The town stretches up from the shore into a bleak, narrow valley between two high mountains. A single street of shops and pubs gives way to brightly coloured wooden houses. Disused mine tramway towers sprout from the mountain slopes like bare raspberry canes in winter. At the upper end of town is a cemetery where victims of the Spanish flu lie alongside one of the Norwegians killed in the German bombardment of Svalbard in 1943.

The highlight of our visit to Longyearbyen was a trip to Mine Number 7, the youngest of the island's coal mines and the only one that is still producing. Our guide, a former

miner, drove us a few kilometres out of town and up a hairpin road to the mine entrance. We put on dusty mining suits and piled into a dilapidated minivan for a spooky five-minute ride deep into the mountain, following the ups and downs of the coal seam to the mine face. Our guide let us see the huge machine that chews at the mountain and showed us how to drive metre-long bolts into the ceiling to stop it from collapsing. Unlike coal layers in Germany or West Virginia, the seams on Svalbard are above ground – indeed, tens of metres above ground – so one goes up to them, not down. This also means they are easier to ventilate, which is why we were able to drive a car into the seam. Half of Mine Number 7's production goes to the Longyearbyen power plant and the rest is exported to mainland Europe.

Fewer than a dozen people still work in mining in Longyearbyen, although quite a few more commute in shifts over to the large coal mine in the nearby settlement of Sveagruva. Longyearbyen is reinventing itself as a tourism and education centre. I had a small-world moment when one of the other mine tour participants turned out to be an acquaintance from Reykjavík, who had just spent seven days circumnavigating Svalbard on a small cruise ship, the *Polar Star*. She said she'd seen 30 polar bears. We met two middle-aged Danish women in front of the shop, newly in from a trekking tour, broad smiles on their faces and their rifles still strapped to their back. Anyone who leaves settled areas must carry a rifle and know how to use it, as Svalbard's polar bears

can and do eat humans.

The most impressive building in town is the brand-new university centre, which also houses the museum, bookshop and tourist office. The university centre is a cooperative project of several mainland Norwegian universities, not an independent institution. It has beautiful polished wood floors, and everyone has to take off their shoes even to enter the public spaces. I couldn't resist buying a book on polar bears at the bookshop and another on Franz Josef Land.

I once imagined Longyearbyen as a sort of arctic camp, with Nansen-like figures stumbling out of tents with ice in their beards, smelling of polar-bear steak. In fact Longyearbyen reminded me very much of certain Icelandic towns – say, Borgarnes or Siglufjörður. One main difference is that it's a town of transients who mostly live there for only a few years – no one really has roots in Longyearbyen. And there aren't any reindeer wandering the streets in Borgarnes.

Before stopping in Longyearbyen, our ship sailed under bright sunshine into Magdalenafjord at Svalbard's northwestern tip, as well as Hornsund in southern Svalbard. Both fjords had fine glaciers and craggy peaks, and Hornsund has a small Polish-run scientific research station. We also sailed up past 80° north to the edge of the polar ice cap. I thought we'd see giant icebergs, like the Antarctic ice sheets, but the polar ice cap is made of thin, flat floes formed from frozen sea surface which extend just inches above and below the water. At its edge, the floes are

small and broken, with more water than ice. We stood on deck looking down at the ice as the ship bumped against one floe and the next, kind of like pushing croutons around in a bowl of soup.

From Svalbard we sailed to Akureyri, passing the mysterious island of Jan Mayen on the second morning out. Long, skinny Jan Mayen belongs to Norway. It is home to a huge glacier-capped volcano, called Beerenberg, and a weather station with 18 crew members, who have found that the island has an average of four truly sunny days per year. There is no harbour, so we couldn't land. When I woke up and looked out the window, the ship was sailing through a giant fog-bank and I was afraid I wouldn't see the island at all. But the fog cleared during breakfast, we'd hit one of the four annual sunny days, and the view of Beerenberg and the north coast of the island was great.

I have mixed feelings about the life of a cruise lecturer (at this stage in my life I prefer to work for money instead of free time). But I can recommend Svalbard and (if you can ever get there) Jan Mayen. Svalbard is easy enough to reach, with frequent flights from Oslo and Tromsø, many ships going there each summer, and lots of things to do (see www.svalbard.net, where I reserved the mine tour). As for Jan Mayen, Icelanders have known about it since the year 1194 without ever finding an excuse to spend much time there. Unless you speak Norwegian and can swing yourself a job at the weather station, you'll have to be content with a sail-by.