

Daily Expedition Reports

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Northern Spitsbergen; Krossfjord, Kongsfjord

Jun 21, 2016 - National Geographic Explorer



Mountains above shoreline of 14 July Fjord in Krossfjord, west Spitsbergen.



Black-legged Kittiwakes that nest on the cliffs above the fjord rest on a chunk of glacier ice.



Beluga whales passing along shore as walkers viewed from on shore.

As our chartered flight from Oslo descended and we dropped below the clouds the landscape of Svalbard lay below. For some people on board there was even a glimpse of the waters of the fjord and the village of Longyearbyen and there, anchored in the milky turquoise waters was *National Geographic Explorer*. From the airport terminal we quickly boarded buses which transported us a short distance to the dock. A large ungainly cruise ship was filling the dock space of this small northern community. But that did not stop us as we had already been prepared for our first Zodiac ride to the *National Geographic Explorer*. A safety drill began as the ship lifted anchor and we got underway. Then it was to dinner and a well deserved sleep.

As for the beginning of this day, we were off shore along the west side of the largest island in the archipelago, Spitsbergen Island. The morning was filled with briefings and introductions. Late in the morning we learned about the established procedures for visiting Svalbard and how to be responsible to the Arctic environment. Also we learned about Zodiac operations and shore landings, including the necessity to be safe and careful while on land walking with the naturalist staff.

By the end of lunch we were anchored in a small short fjord with a glacier filling the end along the east side of Krossfjord. The area ashore has been dubbed "Stefan's Garden" to honor the naturalist staff member who encouraged Lindblad Expeditions to first make a stop there some 20 years ago. Because the cliffs face generally to the south and are quite exposed there was no snow remaining on the slopes. Meltwater and fertilizer from nesting seabirds on the cliffs above have allowed numerous species of tundra plants to flourish and some were blooming in the long days of continuous daylight.

Walks ashore of various lengths were organized and led by the ship's naturalists. Some chose a longer exploration and walk along the shore. Others went for a medium length walk while a few ventured only a short distance from the landing to view the plants. One Zodiac was loaded with a few people that wanted to view the landscape from the water.

The biggest surprise of the afternoon was a large group of beluga whales cruising closely to shore. Viewing from the hikes were spectacular, especially since there was an estimated 100 animals swimming along and at times stopping and milling just offshore. While this scene was passing along the shoreline, Svalbard reindeer could be seen on the steep slopes and even a small house-cat sized Arctic fox appeared running around below the cliffs.

After gathering everyone back to the ship, we were treated to the Captain's Welcome Cocktail Party, which allowed Captain Oliver Kouss to introduce the ship's officers. We then sailed out of Kongsfjord and turning to the north to pass around the northern coast of Spitsbergen hoping for more adventures.

About the Author



Bud Lehnhausen - Naturalist

Bud received an undergraduate degree in wildlife biology at Colorado State University. He then immediately went to Alaska where he worked and lived for 30 years. At the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, Bud studied wildlife biology and received a master's degree conducting research on four species of alcid seabird nesting on a remote island in the Gulf of Alaska.

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