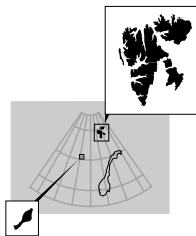


# Svalbard



Svalbard is an assault on the senses. This wondrous archipelago is the world's most readily accessible bit of the polar north and one of the most spectacular places imaginable. Vast icebergs and floes choke the seas, and icefields and glaciers frost the lonely heights. But under close scrutiny, the harsh conditions reveal tiny gems as the Arctic desert soil, however barren-looking, manages to sustain lichens, miniature grasses and delicate little flowers. The environment supports larger creatures too: whales, seals, walruses, Arctic foxes, squat Svalbard reindeer – and polar bears aplenty, outnumbering us humans for the moment.

Svalbard doesn't come easy – especially on the pocket. It's nearly a 1000km flight from the nearest major airport on the mainland and budget accommodation is very much at a premium. The independent traveller is a rare sight on islands; the vast majority of visitors arrive on an organised tour. We recommend signing up for group visits once arriving in Longyearbyen, the usual point of independent entry.

Don't discount a winter visit. There are plenty of outdoor activities to keep you rosy-cheeked and you'll get more of a feel for Longyearbyen as a living community with a *raison d'être* of its own.

What really bumps the cost up is the price of organised tours and activities. Since travel outside Longyearbyen is difficult at best and can be downright dangerous, you miss out on a lot if you don't sign up for one or two. So, when you're doing your pre-holiday sums, budget for a glacier walk, a boat trip or a mine visit and see if you can still make ends meet.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Crunch your crampons on accessible **Longyearbreen glacier** (p379), then fossick for fossils
- Experience pristine Arctic nature on an **organised hiking expedition** (p373)
- Penetrate deep into disused **Mine No 3** (p376) outside Longyearbyen and be glad you're not a collier
- Visit the former Russian mining village of **Barentsburg** (p380)
- Spend a sunny morning surrounded by the brilliant glaciers and turquoise waters of **Magdalenefjord** (p384)



■ POPULATION: 2800

■ HIGHEST ELEVATION: NEWTONTOPPEN (1713M)

## History

The first mention of Svalbard occurs in an Icelandic saga from 1194. Officially, however, the Dutch voyager Willem Barents, in search of a northeast passage to China, is regarded as the first visitor from the European mainland (1596). He named the islands Spitsbergen, or 'sharp mountains'. The Norwegian name, Svalbard, comes from the Old Norse for 'cold coast'; ancient Norse sagas referred to 'a land in the far north at the end of the ocean'. Today, Spitsbergen is the name of Svalbard's largest island. In 1920 the Svalbard Treaty granted Norway sovereignty over the islands and restricted military activities. Initially signed by nine nations, it now has over 40 adherents, whose citizens enjoy the same rights and obligations on the islands as Norwegians themselves.

## POLAR EXPLORATION

Longyearbyen is precisely 1338km from the North Pole (or not quite precisely; by the time you read this, it will be fractionally nearer as Svalbard inches northwards by 2mm per year). In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a series of explorers attempted to reach the North Pole using airships and balloons, and most met with failure. Roald Amundsen and Umberto Nobile were successful in 1926, but two years later Amundsen and his crew died while on a rescue mission to find Nobile, who had disappeared on a similar expedition and was later rescued.

## WHALING & HUNTING

At the time of Barents' discovery, the archipelago was uninhabited, as the early Inuit migrations eastward from Siberia and Alaska halted in Greenland. There's archaeological evidence of Russian overwintering around the beginning of the 17th century but the first confirmed western European activities in Svalbard didn't begin until a decade later. From 1612 to 1720 English, Dutch, French, Norwegian and Danish ships engaged in whaling off the western coast of Spitsbergen island; it's estimated that the Dutch alone slaughtered 60,000 whales.

An English group undertook the first known overwintering at Bellsund in 1630, followed by a Dutch group at Smeerenburg three years later; the following winter, however, scurvy took its toll and the settlement was abandoned for winter, leaving behind a

small caretaker team, who all perished. From the early 18th century, Russian Pomor (coast-dwelling) hunters and traders focused their attentions on Svalbard, hunting walruses, moose, seals and belugas. From around 1795 Norwegians exploited the islands' wildlife resources and began hunting both polar bears and Arctic foxes.

## COAL MINING

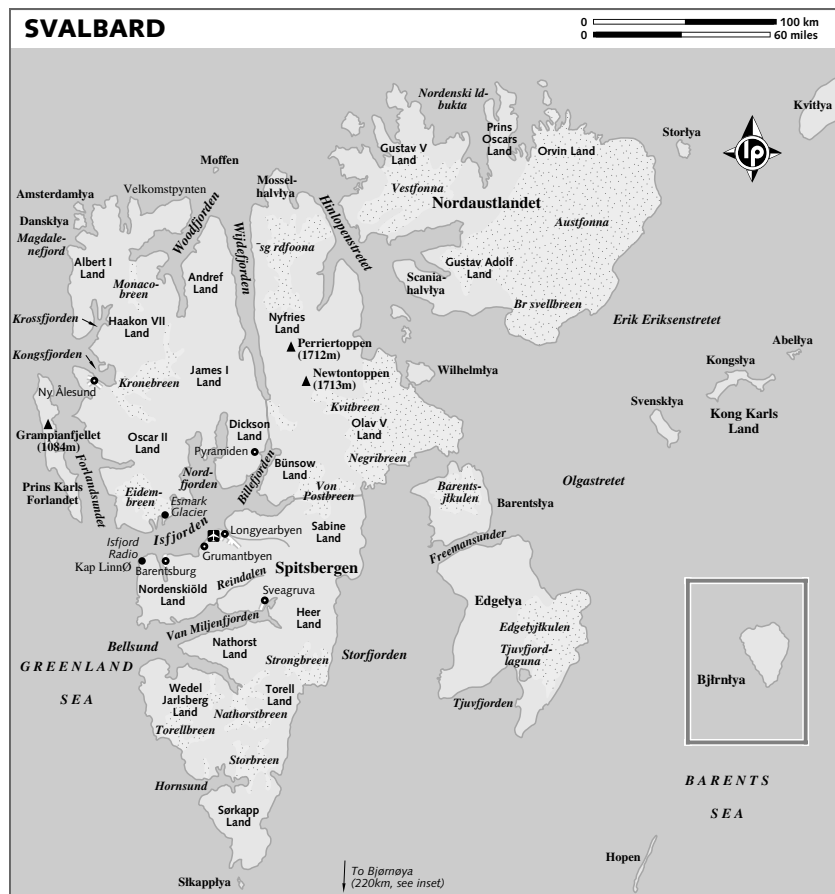
Perhaps as early as 1612 whalers had discovered coal at Ny Ålesund (p382), but the first modern mine wasn't opened until 1906, when the Arctic Coal Company (ACC) began extracting coal from a rich seam. The settlement that grew up around this mine was named for the ACC's US owner, John Munroe Longyear. In 1916 ACC sold out to the Store Norske Spitsbergen Kull Compani (SNSK). Over the next few years, two other Norwegian companies set up operations on the archipelago's southernmost island, Bjørnøya, and the Kings Bay Kull Compani opened a mine at Ny Ålesund.

Mining was halted during WWII and on 3 September 1941 the islands were evacuated. Even so, the Nazis bombed Longyearbyen and the settlements of Barentsburg and Sveagrava (Mine No 2, on the hillside just east of Longyearbyen, was shelled and set alight and continued to burn for 14 years). When the Nazis surrendered in 1945, Norwegian civilians returned, Longyearbyen was rebuilt and the Russians resettled and again mined in Pyramiden and Barentsburg.

Ny Ålesund also re-opened, but was closed down after a mine explosion in 1962 and converted into a scientific post.

Mine No 7 has been in operation for nearly 40 years and nowadays is the only one around Longyearbyen still producing; it yields around 70,000 tonnes per year for firing the town's power station or for export to Germany.

The big one these days is the Svea Nord coalfield, 44km southeast of Longyearbyen. The scale of operation boggles the mind. It produces around three million tonnes annually – extracting more in two days than Mine No 7 does in a year. There are estimated reserves of over 30 million tonnes and the project will extend until at least 2013. At the other end of the scale, the workforce, based in Longyearbyen and flown into Sveagrava for three-week shifts, is small, operating colossal,



state-of-the-art machinery that chews its way through the mountain.

### OTHER NATURAL RESOURCES

The most sanguine predictions of Svalbard's gold reserves beneath the Arctic soil put them on a level with South Africa's. There are also indications of rich oil and gas deposits, which will become more easily and economically accessible if global warming continues.

### Geography & Climate

Svalbard is 13% vegetation, 27% barren stone and a massive 60% glacier. Summer, the brief season when you're most likely to visit, is a period of hectic growth for plants, mammals and birds alike. The land's sparse, stunted,

ground-hugging vegetation contrasts with the bounty of the surrounding seas, where everything from microscopic plankton to beluga whales flourishes.

The archipelago is about the size of Ireland and consists mainly of glaciated and eroded sedimentary layers that were deposited beneath the sea up to 1.2 billion years ago. It's difficult to imagine but between 300 million and 60 million years ago, Svalbard was lush and tropical. Rich layers of organic matter built up on the surface, then metamorphosed under great heat and pressure into coal. Continental drift shifted it to its present polar location, and most present-day landforms were created during the ice ages of the past two million years. Its high-

### DON'T DISTURB SVALBARD!

'We realise it's not possible to be an invisible tourist, but we appreciate your trying', says the tourist literature. In addition to treading lightly, you will also be making your modest contribution to the preservation of Svalbard in another way. A levy of Nkr150 per visitor is added to the price of your plane or cruise-ship ticket. The income this raises is ring-fenced to support environmental measures across the archipelago.

Any pre-1946 remains of human activity are classified as 'cultural monuments' and aren't to be touched. This is understandable, particularly where it relates to evidence of distant whalers and hunters or old graves. But it's a very grandiose term when applied to the rusting machinery, scruffy pylons and tumbling wooden piles and gantries around Longyearbyen – industrial detritus that authorities elsewhere would be compelling companies to have removed.

est points are Newtontoppen (1713m) and Perriertoppen (1712m).

Svalbard's latitude ranges from 74°N at Bjørnøya in the south to over 80°N on northern Spitsbergen and Nordaustlandet. In Longyearbyen the midnight sun lasts from 19 April to 23 August, while it never even peeks above the horizon between 28 October and 14 February.

The archipelago enjoys a brisk polar-desert climate, with only 200mm to 300mm of precipitation annually. Although the west coast remains ice-free for most of the summer, pack ice hovers just north of the main island year-round, and sheets and rivers of ice cover approximately 60% of the land area. Snow and frost are possible at any time of year; the mean annual temperature is -4°C, and in July, it's only 6°C. On occasion, however, you may experience temperatures of up to 20°C. In January the mean temperature is -16°C, but temperatures of -30°C aren't uncommon.

Given current global concern about the fate of polar bears as the Arctic icecap melts, it's an encouraging thought, especially for bears, that, at least for the moment, the current human population of Svalbard of around 2800 is still exceeded by the number of bears, estimated between 3000 and 3500.

### Dangers & Annoyances

In real life Svalbard's symbol, the polar bear, is not the cute fuzzy thing you see in the zoo. Even one bear at close quarters is one too many. While it's most unlikely that you'll have a Close Encounter of the Furred Kind in the environs of Longyearbyen, the best advice is, if you're trekking, go with an organised tour. Walk leaders carry a gun and know how to use it. Standard equipment too, especially if you're camping, are trip wires with flares and

distress flares too – to fire at the ground in front of the bear, not to summon help, which could be hours away.

If, despite this, you're determined to set out without a guide, carry the same equipment; several places in town rent out kits – and make sure you get in some practice shooting before you travel if one end of a gun is much the same as another to you.

Don't get alarmed; the last bear fatality was in 1995 – but it happened only 2km from Longyearbyen...

### Tours

For reasons of security and sheer logistics, it's almost impossible to arrange independent trips on Svalbard and we endorse the governor's advice that you should book or organise tours through recognised operators. Fortunately, there's a huge range of options from winter dog-sledding or snowmobiling day trips to two-week excursions to the North Pole. The official **tourist information website** ([www.svalbard.net](http://www.svalbard.net)) lists dozens of tours and we detail but a sample of the most popular ones below. For more day-trip ideas, see p377.

### SPITSBERGEN TRAVEL

One of the giants of the Svalbard travel scene, **Spitsbergen Travel** (☎ 79 02 61 00; [www.spitsbergen-travel.no](http://www.spitsbergen-travel.no)) runs three-day guided cruises between mid-June and mid-September aboard the former Hurtigruten coastal steamer *Nordstjernena*, putting ashore at both Barentsburg and Ny Ålesund. Prices, not including airfare, start at Nkr7930/12,875 per person without/with private shower. It also offers seven-day cruises with the smaller *Polar Star*, which penetrates more deeply into Svalbard's so lightly travelled areas. Prices begin at Nkr32,600 per double cabin.

## POLAR BEARS UNDER THREAT

Polar bear numbers had been in decline since the late 19th century, when intensive hunting began. But ever since the 1973 treaty for the Conservation of Polar Bears and their Habitat, signed by all the countries whose lands impinge upon the Arctic, polar bear numbers have been gradually increasing again. But nowadays there's a new, less direct and more pervasive threat that can't be controlled by legislation.

Polar bears, for town- and temperate-climate dwellers, are almost a symbol of the Arctic wilderness – loners, immensely strong and survivors in one of the world's most extreme environments. But for all the bears' raw power, some scientists predict that they could be extinct by the end of this century if the world continues to heat up. As in so much of the globe's cold parts, Svalbard's glaciers are retreating. The ice sheet, their natural habitat and prime hunting ground for seals, mainstay of their diet (an adult bear needs to eat between 50 and 75 seals every year), is shrinking. Some computer models suggest that it might even disappear entirely from the North Pole in summertime. Although polar bears are powerful swimmers (in fact, they're classified as marine mammals), many risk drowning as they attempt to reach fresh ice floes. Less sea ice also means that some populations will become isolated and inbred, their genetic stock weakened. The birth rate may fall since females need plenty of deep snow to dig the dens in which they will whelp. And hungry bears, on the prowl and desperate for food, could lead to increasing confrontations with humans, where the bear stands little chance of coming off best.

Your chances of seeing one, unless you're on a cruise and observing from the safety of a ship, are minimal. Otherwise, contact is actively discouraged, both for your and the bear's sake (if a snowmobiler irresponsibly gives chase, for example, he or she will be in for a stiff fine). Bears under pressure, apart from being stressed out, quickly overheat under their shaggy coats and may even die of heat exhaustion if pursued.

Should you be unlucky enough to come within sight of one on land, don't even think of approaching it. An altogether safer way to track polar bears is to log onto [www.panda.org/polar](http://www.panda.org/polar) bears, managed by the World Wildlife Fund. Here, you can track the movements of four bears that scientists have equipped with a collar and satellite transmitter. You'll also learn a whole lot more about how these magnificent, resilient creatures survive in such tough conditions.

## SVALBARD WILDLIFE SERVICE

Offering many of the usual and several unusual trips, **Svalbard Wildlife Service** (☎ 79 02 56 60; [www.wildlife.no](http://www.wildlife.no); 🕒 9am–4pm Mon–Fri) can take you on three days of camping, hiking and kayaking around the Esmark glacier (Nkr6400), or seven days among the glaciers, seals and walrus of Prins Karls Forlandet island (Nkr13,500).

## SPITSBERGEN TOURS

The owner of **Spitsbergen Tours** (☎ 79 02 10 68; [www.terrapolaris.com](http://www.terrapolaris.com)), Andreas Umbreit, with 20 years experience on the archipelago, has written the standard guide in English about Svalbard (see the boxed text, p378).

The range of adventurous options includes an Arctic week in three versions, based in Longyearbyen: during the long, dark polar night (Nkr10,200), in April's wintry spring-time (Nkr13,800), or during the summer high season, when prices range from Nkr7650 if you camp to Nkr19,000 in single room accommodation. The price includes day ex-

cursions from the settlements (for example, two days of dog-sledding, a snow-machine tour, boat cruises and walks, according to season). Winter dog-sledding tours cost around Nkr2000 per day and it's advisable to book well in advance. For the hardy, there are also winter snowshoe and hiking weeks (Nkr12,800) with accommodation in tents (make sure you bring a four-season sleeping bag) and the opportunity to build – and sleep in, if you choose – an igloo.

Spitsbergen Tours also organises modular hiking tours, within the capacity of anyone who's reasonably fit, that mix day walks with linear treks. All-in prices for one/two/three weeks are Nkr7900/13,200/22,000.

## GUIDED CRUISES

Among travel operators who can arrange guided cruises around the archipelago are, in the UK, **Discover the World** (☎ 01737-218 800; [www.discovertheworld.co.uk](http://www.discovertheworld.co.uk); Arctic House, 8 Bolters Lane, Banstead, Surrey SM7 2AR) and the Canadian-based company

**GAP Adventures** ([www.gapadventures.com](http://www.gapadventures.com); Canada 19 Charlotte St, Toronto, Ontario M5V 2H5; North America ☎ 1-800-708-7761; UK ☎ 0870 999 0144; Australia ☎ 1300 796 618).

## POLI ARCTICI

**Poli Arctici** (☎ 79 02 17 05; [www.poliarctici.com](http://www.poliarctici.com)) is the trading name of Stefano Poli, originally from Milan and with 13 years as a Svalbard wilderness guide under his belt. Specialising in multiday treks, he also offers guided day hikes and, in winter, snowmobile sorties.

## BASECAMP SPITSBERGEN

**Basecamp Spitsbergen** (☎ 79 02 46 00; [www.basecampexplorer.com](http://www.basecampexplorer.com)) mainly offers winter activities, including a stay aboard the *Noorderlicht*, a Dutch sailing vessel that's set into the fjord ice as the long freeze begins each autumn. It also offers winter and summer stays at Isfjord Radio, the ultimate remote getaway on an upgraded, one-time radio station at the north-western tip of Spitsbergen island.

## SVALBARD VILLMARKSSENTER

The experts in dog mushing are **Svalbard Villmarkscenter** (☎ 79 02 17 00; [www.svalbardvillmarkscenter.no](http://www.svalbardvillmarkscenter.no)), whether by sledge over the snow or – OK, it's not the same thing but it gives you a feel of what a wintertime dog-sled experience must be like – on wheels during summer.

## LONGYEARBYEN

### POP 1500

Svalbard's only town – indeed, only centre with more than a handful of inhabitants – Longyearbyen (literally the 'LongYear Town') is these days a base for tourism. But its gritty coal-mining roots still show through, commemorated in the statue of a grizzled miner and his pick near the Lompensenteret. For decades, Store Norsk, owner of the pits, possessed the communal mess, company shop, transport in and out, and almost the miners' souls. Then in 1976 the Norwegian state stepped in to bale the company out from bankruptcy. Today, most of the few people that live here year-round enjoy one-year tax-free contracts.

The modern town, fringed by abandoned mining detritus, enjoys a superb backdrop including two glacier tongues, Longyearbreen and Lars Hjertabreen. Construction here takes into account the harsh Arctic climate; most structures are built on pilings to prevent heated buildings from melting the permafrost

that's never more than a metre deep, then simply sinking into it. The heavily insulated plumbing pipes also run above ground.

Reflecting the days when miners would remove their coal-dust-encrusted boots at the threshold, local decorum still dictates that people take off their shoes upon entering most buildings in town. Exceptions include the majority of shops and places to eat.

## Information

**Basecamp Spitsbergen** (per 10min Nkr20) One internet terminal.

**Library** (Lompensenteret; 🕒 11am–6pm Mon–Thu) Free internet.

**Longyearbyen Hospital casualty clinic** (☎ 79 02 42 00)

**Sparebank 1 Norge Bank & ATM** in the post office building.

**Tourist office** (☎ 79 02 55 50; [www.svalbard.net](http://www.svalbard.net); 🕒 10am–5pm May–Sep, noon–5pm rest-of-year) Within the Gateway to Svalbard complex. Produces the comprehensive *Guide Longyearbyen* and a weekly activities list of the infinite range of outdoor pursuits.

## Sights & Activities

### SVALBARD MUSEUM

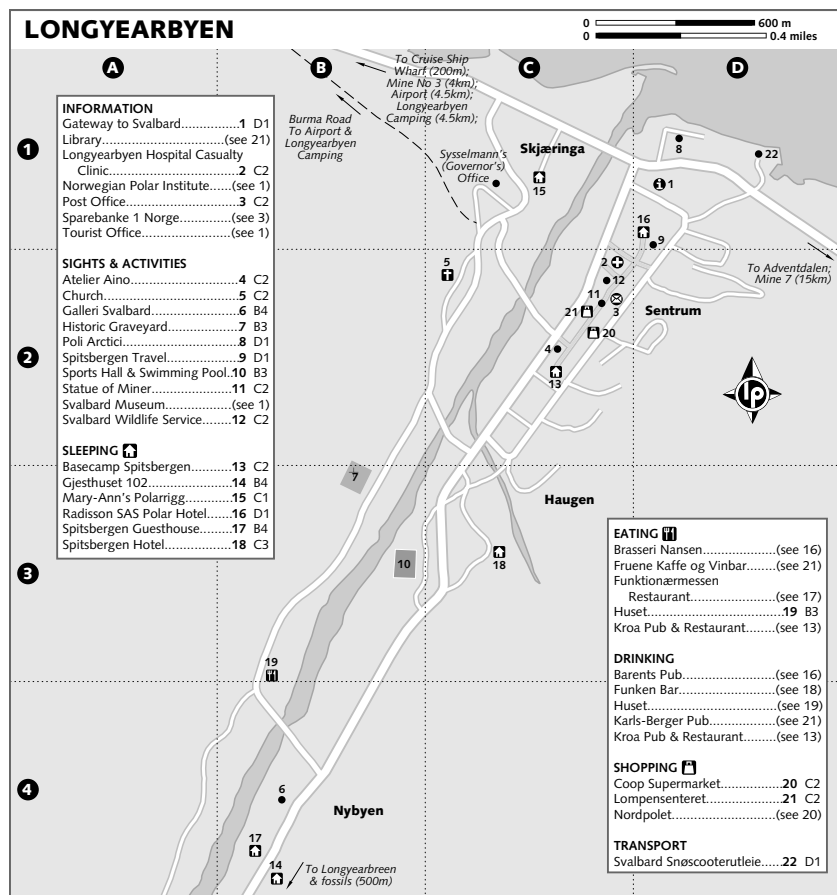
Museum is the wrong word for this impressive, recently inaugurated exhibition space. Themes include the life on the edge formerly led by whalers, trappers, seal and walrus hunters and, more recently, miners. It's an attractive mix of text, artefacts and birds and mammals, stuffed and staring. There's a cosy book-browsing area too where you can lounge on sealskin cushions and rugs.

## HELLO SUNSHINE

Some 50m south of Svalbard's church stand five weathered wooden steps, all alone, and a barely legible sign, 'Sykhustrappa' (Hospital Stairs). They're all that remain of Longyearbyen's first hospital and they have a special significance for the town's residents.

Traditionally, a week of celebrations to dispel the weeks of winter darkness would begin once the first of the spring sun's rays touched the top step. The hospital is long demolished but this little piece of solar timekeeping has been preserved and the tradition continues.



**MINE NO 3**

Sign on for a three-hour journey deep into **Mine No 3** (admission incl transport from your lodging Nkr590, minimum age 14). Productive from 1971 to 1996, this was the last shaft to be worked manually, thrusting itself 5.5km deep into the heart of the mountain. The side spurs, from whose veins the coal was hacked, were only 80cm high. You can crawl into one to sense what life at the coal face was really like.

**MINE NO 7**

In summer **Svalbard Explorer** (☎ 90 76 29 33; www.svalbardexplorer.no in Norwegian) runs trips (Nkr590) once or twice daily to Longyearbyen's last producing coal mine, 15km east of the town.

**HISTORIC GRAVEYARD**

This haunting little graveyard with its simple white, wooden crosses dates from the early 20th century. In a few days in October 1918, seven young men in Longyearbyen were struck down by the Spanish flu, a virus that killed 40 million people in Europe, Asia and North America.

**GALLERI SVALBARD**

**Galleri Svalbard** (☎ 79 02 23 40; adult/child/concession Nkr50/20/40; ☎ 11am-5pm) features the Svalbard-themed works of Norwegian artist Kåre Tveter, so pure and cold they make you shiver; reproductions of early maps of Svalbard; and a 10-minute film, *The Arctic*

*Nature of Svalbard*, which gives a glimpse of Svalbard's other, winter persona.

**ATELIER AINO**

**Atelier Aino** (admission free; ☎ 11am-5pm Mon-Fri, 11am-3pm Sat) Follow the sign directing you off the main pedestrian street to the gallery and workshop of Danish artist Aino Grib. A resident of Svalbard, she captures in her canvases the hues and tones of the Arctic seasons.

**BIRD-WATCHING**

Flocks of birds nest on Svalbard each summer and large numbers call by during their annual migration as well. Among the many species on show are puffins, little auks, purple sandpipers, Brünnich's guillemots, red-throated divers, various gulls and skuas, and many geese species, including barnacle, pink-footed and Brent.

**SWIMMING**

If you've energy left at the end of the day, plunge into Longyearbyen's heated pool at the Sports Hall.

**Tours**

You'll be disappointed if you restrict yourself to scruffy Longyearbyen and you'll leave with little sense of the sheer majesty of Svalbard's wilderness. Fortunately, there's a dizzying array of short trips and day tours that vary with the season, including fossil hunting (Nkr300), mine tours (Nkr590), boat trips to Barentsburg (Nkr990), dog-sledding (Nkr800), glacier walking (from Nkr490), ice-caving (from Nkr520), kayaking (from Nkr550), horse riding (Nkr550) and snowmobiling (Nkr1000 to Nkr1400). The tourist office's weekly activities list details many more. All outings can be booked through individual operators (directly or via their websites) or online at the tourist office.

For further information on longer tours, see p373.

**Sleeping**

**Longyearbyen Camping** (☎ 79 02 10 68; www.longyearbyen-camping.com; per person Nkr90; ☎ mid-Jun-mid-Sep) Near the airport on a flat stretch of turf, this particularly friendly camp site overlooks Isfjorden and the glaciers beyond and has a kitchen and showers. It's about an hour's walk from town or you can rent a bicycle (per

**BRINGING THE ARK TO THE ARCTIC: SVALBARD GLOBAL SEED VAULT**

Deep inside the mountain, down beneath the permafrost, a vast man-made cavern, already dubbed the Doomsday Vault or a vegetarian Noah's Ark, was completed in early 2008. It's a repository with a capacity for up to four million different seeds, representing the botanical diversity of the planet. Samples from seed banks and collections all over the world are to be kept here at a constant temperature of -18°C so that, should a species become extinct in its native habitat, it can be revived and won't be lost for eternity.

day for campers Nkr100). You can also hire a tent (per night Nkr100), mattress (Nkr20) and sleeping bag (first/subsequent nights Nkr50/30). There are no cabins.

**Poli Arctici** (☎ 79 02 17 05, 91 38 34 67; www.poliarctici.com; s/d Nkr700/800) Seasoned Arctic guide Stefano Poli has four good-value apartments, each with bathroom and self-catering facilities, in the centre of Longyearbyen.

Longyearbyen has a couple of reasonably priced – for the island – options in Nybyen, at the southern extremity of town, about a 20-minute walk from the centre. Formerly miners' accommodation, they have corridor bathrooms, a kitchen for self-caterers and small lounge. Prices include breakfast.

**Gjesthuset 102** (☎ 79 02 57 16; 102@wildlife.no; dm/s/d Nkr300/495/850; ☎ Mar-Nov) Guesthouse 102 (which, to confuse things, occupies building 7) belongs to Svalbard Wildlife Service and was once sardonically nicknamed 'Millionaire's Residence'.

**Spitsbergen Guesthouse** (☎ 79 02 63 00; www.spitsbergentravel.no; dm/s/d Nkr295/500/850; ☎ mid-Mar-Sep) This guesthouse is a subsidiary of Spitsbergen Travel spread over four buildings, one of which houses the large breakfast room (once the miners' mess hall), and can accommodate up to 136.

**our pick** **Mary-Ann's Polarrigg** (☎ 79 02 37 02; www.polarrigg.com; Skjæringa; s/d with shared bathroom Nkr595/875, d Nkr2000) Run by the ebullient Mary-Ann and adorned with mining and hunting memorabilia, the Polarrigg brims with character. Betraying its origins as a workers' billet from without, it's cosiness itself within. In the main wing, rooms have corridor bathrooms

## SVALBARD BOOKS

*Spitsbergen: Svalbard, Franz Josef Land, Jan Mayen* by long-time Svalbard resident Andreas Umbreit is a splendid guide to the whole archipelago.

The Norwegian Polar Institute's *Birds and Mammals of Svalbard* and its *Marine Mammals of Svalbard*, both fully illustrated with photos, are sound and very readable. *Flowers of Svalbard* by Olav Gjærevoll and Olav Rønning is also well illustrated with colour photos. *The Flora of Svalbard* by Olav Rønning, alone is more complete but less comprehensively illustrated.

*Svalbard & the Life in Polar Oceans* by Bjorn Gulliksen and Erling Svendsen deals specifically with the marine life and ecology of the region, but it's also of interest to the more general reader and has stacks of stunning photos.

The Governor of Svalbard's office publishes some excellent booklets in English, both for guiding and for background reading. *Isfjorden* by Kristin Prestvold is an impressive guide to the fjord that runs between Longyearbyen, Barentsburg and west to the headland of Kap Linné. More general titles include *Smeerenburg & Gravneseet*, the fascinating history of a whaling community; and *Virgohamna*, an equally compelling description of this one-time base for North Pole expeditions.

and doubles come with bunk beds. There's a large, comfortably furnished lounge with sink-into armchairs and another with billiards, darts and a guitar to strum on. In the smart annexe, rooms have every comfort.

**Spitsbergen Hotel** (☎ 79 02 62 00; www.spitsbergentravel.no; s/d Nkr1200/1390; 🗓️: mid-Feb–mid-Oct; 📺) This comfortable place (sink yourself low into the leather armchairs of its salon), where the mine bosses once lived, contrasts to this day with the two Nybyen guesthouses, previously the miners' more spartan quarters.

**Radisson SAS Polar Hotel** (☎ 79 02 34 50; www.radissonsas.com; s/d Nkr1290/1510; 📺) This 95-room chain hotel ('the world's northernmost full-service hotel') is the town's most luxurious. Rooms are stylishly furnished and it's well worth paying Nkr200 extra for one with views of the fjord and Hiorthfjellet mountain beyond. Its annexe was originally accommodation for the Lillehammer Winter Olympic Games, then transported here.

**our pick Basecamp Spitsbergen** (☎ 79 02 46 00; www.basecampexplorer.com; s/d Nkr1750/1960; 📺) Imagine a re-created sealing hut, built in part from recycled beams, planks and flotsam. Add artefacts and decorations, culled from the local refuse dump and mining castoffs. Graft on 21st-century plumbing and design flair and you've got this place, also known as Trapper's Lodge. Its 16 cabin-like rooms are cosiness and comfort defined and the breakfasts are splendid.

## Eating

**Fruene Kaffe og Vinbar** (☎ 79 02 76 40; Lompensenteret; 🗓️: core hrs 10am–5pm) 'The Missus', run by three

sprightly young women, is a welcoming café, serving decent coffee, baguettes, pizza and snacks.

**Mary-Ann's Polarrigg** (☎ 79 02 37 02) The world's most northerly Thai restaurant dishes up spicy rice dishes in a wonderful glasshouse setting, festooned with living plants that, unlike their native Svalbard counterparts, entwine and climb much more than 2cm high.

Longyearbyen has two excellent hotel restaurants: **Brasseri Nansen** (3-/4-course dinner Nkr350/420, summer buffet Nkr295) at the Radisson SAS Polar; and **Funktionærernes Restaurant** in the Spitsbergen Hotel. These apart, locals will tell you that the two best places to eat and drink are the pub and the house. But not just any old pub or house...

**our pick Kroa** (The Pub; ☎ 79 02 13 00; mains around Nkr200) This pub and restaurant was reconstructed from the elements of a building brought in from Russian Barentsburg (the giant white bust of Lenin peeking from behind the bar – and sporting a Liverpool FC scarf when we were last here – gives a clue). Service is cheerful and mains verge on the gargantuan. Starters are more modest in size. Try, for example, the cured seal (Nkr78) or Arctic char (Nkr92).

**Huset** (The House; ☎ 79 02 25 00) It's something of a walk to work up an appetite for the Huset's highly regarded restaurant, on whose menu (Nkr495) reindeer and grouse feature regularly. The bar serves up pizzas (Nkr85 to Nkr100), whale in pepper sauce (Nkr165) and seal stew (Nkr155) and its signature *hamburger med alt* (Nkr96) – a meaty burger

with all the trimmings, so juicy, a researcher told us, that lonely scientists in their tents dream of it. A curiosity for a place so far from the nearest vineyard: its wine cellar has over 20,000 bottles.

The Coop Supermarket in Svalbardbutikken carries a good selection of groceries.

## Drinking & Entertainment

Bustling Kroa, its metal bar stools fashioned from old mine stanchions, is normally the choice of younger locals. More formal are the Radisson's Barents Pub and Funken Bar at the Spitsbergen Hotel.

Huset is your all-purpose night spot, with a bar and weekend nightclub (cover charge Nkr50). It also houses the town cinema, which screens feature films a couple of nights a week.

Enter **Karls-Berger Pub Café** (☎ 79 02 25 11; Lompensenteret; 🗓️: 5pm–2am), put on your shades and prepare to be dazzled at the sight of over 1000 bottles of whiskies, brandies and sundry spirits shimmering behind the bar of this snug pub.

Although alcohol is duty-free in Svalbard, it's rationed for locals and visitors must present a valid onward airline ticket in order to buy it. The Nordpolet booze outlet is at the back of the Coop Supermarket.

## Getting There & Away

In clear weather, the descent to Longyearbyen gives otherworldly views of glaciers and ice floes. SAS flies to/from Oslo directly in summer (three flights weekly) or via Tromsø year-round, making the 957km flight once or twice daily. There are as many as 11 different tariffs; book early to avoid paying the 11th least expensive.

## Getting Around

**Svalbard Maxi Taxi** (☎ 79 02 13 05) and **Longyearbyen Taxi** (☎ 79 02 13 75) charge Nkr80 to Nkr120 for the journey between town and airport. The airport bus (Nkr40) connects with flights and runs up to the two guesthouses at the southern extremity of town, calling by hotels.

Possibilities for car hire include **Longyearbyen Bilutleie** (☎ 78 02 11 88) and **Svalbard Auto** (☎ 79 02 49 30). You'll tank up on the cheapest petrol in Norway but there is only 45km of road and not much to see from a vehicle.

Bicycles would be a better bet, and you can rent them from **Poli Arctici** (☎ 79 02 17 05;

Nkr150 per day) or **Basecamp** (☎ 79 02 46 00; Nkr280 per day).

To scoot around Svalbard on a snowmobile in winter, you'll need to flash your home driving licence. Check with the tourist office; many areas are off limits for snowmobiles to allow wildlife a little peace and quiet. Rental agencies include **Svalbard Snøscooterutleie** (☎ 79 02 16 66; www.scooterutleie.svalbard.no) and **Svalbard Reiser Kroa** (☎ 79 02 56 50). Daily rates are from Nkr1000 to Nkr1400.

## AROUND LONGYEARBYEN Platåberget & Bjørndalen

The extensive upland region that overlooks Longyearbyen to the west is known as Platåberget (commonly called The Plateau) and makes for a popular day hike. Either ascend a steep, scree-covered route from near the governor's office or, preferably, sneak up Blomsterdalen, not far from Mine No 3. You can also get onto Platåberget via Bjørndalen (yes, it means 'bear valley'), south of the airport. Once on the plateau it's possible to continue to the summit of Nordenskiöldsfjellet (1050m), where a Swedish observatory is said to have once operated.

## Longyearbreen

The prominent glacier tongues licking at the upper, southwestern outskirts of Longyearbyen have scoured and gouged through many layers of sedimentary material, including fossil layers, created when Svalbard enjoyed a more tropical climate. The terminal moraine churns up plant fossils – leaves and twigs that left their marks 40 to 60 million years ago. Several guided walks build in time for a little foraging.

To get there under your own steam, pass the Huset and head up the river's true left bank, past the abandoned mine buildings, and onto a rough track. After the remains of a bridge (on your left), you'll approach the terminal moraine and cross a stream that flows down from your left. The track then traverses some steep slopes, crosses the river (sometimes there's a bridge) and continues upstream to its end at the fossil fields. The 5km return hike from Huset takes about 1½ hours, not counting fossicking time.

## Burma Road

The Burma Rd, which is now a walking track, follows the old coal-mine Taubanen cableway

### SVALBARD'S REINDEER

Svalbard's reindeer are genetically akin to their distant Canadian cousins and some have been found bearing Russian tags, proving that they walked in over the ice. Unlike their cousins on the mainland, they don't live in herds but in family groups of two to six animals. Since they have no predators – they're too fleet over other than short distances for polar bears, which are quick out of the traps but incapable of sustaining speed – they thrive and the estimated population of around 8000 is kept constant by an annual cull of 250. Most Svalbard reindeer starve slowly to death when they're about eight years old, their teeth having been ground to stumps by the stones and pebbles they mouth along with sprigs of edible matter.

to the processing plant and Mine No 3, near the airport. It makes an easy half-day hike.

### Adventdalen

Stark, wide-open Adventdalen beckons visitors with wild Arctic landscapes. There's pleasant hiking, but as you'll sense from the polar bear crossing sign at the town end of the valley, you should carry a firearm.

After leaving town, you'll pass the pungent husky kennels; Isdammen, a freshwater lake that provides drinking water for Longyearbyen, then a northern lights station. With a car or bike, you can also cruise out to the defunct **coal mine Nos 5 and 6** and pass **No 7** (the only one that still functions).

### BARENTSBURG

pop 600

The first thing you see of Barentsburg, Svalbard's only remaining Russian settlement, is its power-station chimney, belching dark black smoke into the blue sky. This isolated village continues to mine coal against all odds and still produces up to 350,000 tonnes per year, though selling it on the open market is a constant problem and stockpiles are huge. Everything's a bit run-down, dishevelled and sooty. With its signing in Cyrillic script, a still-standing bust of Lenin and murals of muscly workers in heroic pose, it feels further east and of the last century.

### History

Barentsburg, on Grønfjorden, was first identified as a coal producing area around 1900, when the Kullkompaniet Isefjord Spitsbergen started operations. Several other companies also sank shafts and in 1920 the town was founded by the Dutch company Nespico. Twelve years later it passed to the Soviet Trust Arktikugol.

Like Longyearbyen, Barentsburg was partially destroyed by the British Royal Navy in 1941 to prevent it falling into Nazi hands (ironically, the German navy itself finished the job later). In 1948 it was rebuilt by Trust Arktikugol and embarked on a period of growth, development and scientific research that lasted until the fall of the Soviet Union.

Barentsburg, like every other pit on Svalbard, has known tragedy. In 1996 many of those who perished in a plane crash during a blizzard near Adventdalen (left) were miners' families from the Ukraine. Then in 1997, only a year later, 23 miners died in a devastating mine explosion and fire.

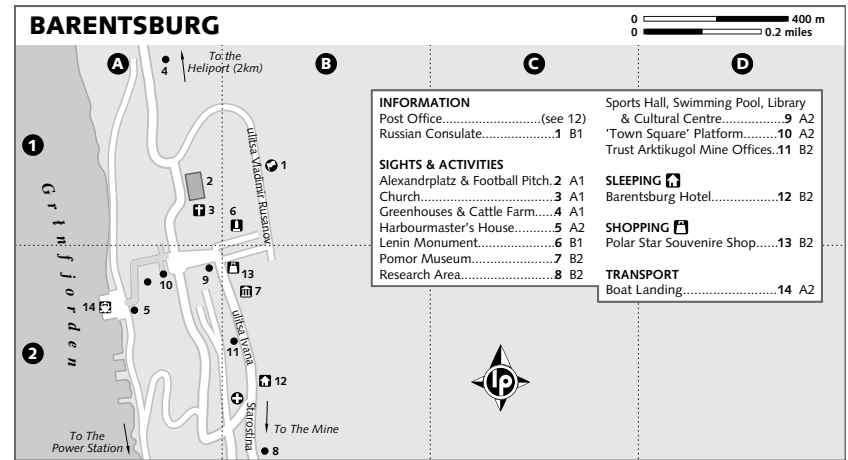
These days, most of Trust Arktikugol's coal shipments go directly to the west, notably to power stations in the Netherlands. Pay cheques are now being eaten up by Russian inflation and obsolete mining equipment is breaking down. The scientific community is reduced, though a small team of geophysicists, meteorologists and glaciologists still researches, and the town's population has dwindled to around 600.

Supplies are sparse and Barentsburg continues to grow some of its own produce, including tomatoes, onions and peppers. However, most of the former pig farm has ended up in the cooking pot – though you may see a few of the community's very last cows clomping around. For most people, conditions here are preferable to those at home in Russia (or the Ukraine, home to around half of Barentsburg's people) and quite a lot choose to remain in Barentsburg beyond their standard initial two-year contracts.

### Sights & Activities

You'll almost certainly be visiting Barentsburg as part of an organised tour. Once the guiding is over, do rush around in the short time left before the boat weighs anchor and fit in a visit to the following.

The simple, appealing little **Pomor museum** (☎ 79 02 18 14; admission Nkr40; 🚢 when tour boats are



in port) outlines (in Russian only) the historic Pomor trade with mainland Russia, plus Russian mining and history on Svalbard. Especially worthwhile are the excellent geological exhibits and the collection of artefacts suggesting Russian activity in Svalbard prior to the archipelago's accepted European 'discovery' by Willem Barents.

The small wooden Orthodox **chapel** commemorates the twin disasters of 1996 and 1997 (see opposite). Above the football pitch and set aside from the community's other buildings, it merits poking your nose inside.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Barentsburg Hotel** (☎ 79 02 10 80, 79 02 18 14; d Nkr550) The Barentsburg Hotel (the settlement's only accommodation for visitors) serves traditional Russian meals, featuring such specialties as boiled pork with potatoes and Arctic sorrel, parsley and sour cream. If you're overnighting, sign on for the gourmet dinner, offering both Russian and Ukrainian cuisine, lubricated with Russian champagne and vodka.

In the bar, you can enjoy a deliciously affordable and generous slug of vodka or a Russian beer. It also sells large tins of the Real McCoy caviar at prices you'll never find elsewhere in the West, let alone Norway.

### Shopping

Polar Star Souvenire Shop is conveniently positioned as you begin to descend the 238 steps to the quayside. It's worth dropping into if you should be after a babushka

doll, Lenin lapel badge or some Soviet army surplus.

### Getting There & Away

Several tour operators (p373) do summertime nine- to 10-hour **boat trips** (adult/child Nkr1190/890) to Barentsburg from Longyearbyen. The cruise, which is half the fun, sails past the one-time Russian colliery of Grumantbyen, abandoned in the 1960s, and also heads across the fjord to the vast Esmark glacier on the homeward journey. The price includes a light lunch and around 1½ hours in Barentsburg, mostly occupied by a guided tour. Most longer cruises also call in at Barentsburg.

In winter, you can belt across the snow and ice on a **snowmobile guided tour** (adult/child Nkr2150/1200). The record for the trip between Longyearbyen and Barentsburg is precisely 22 minutes but tours stretch the journey to a more leisurely, much more enjoyable three hours each way.

### PYRAMIDEN

Formerly Russia's second settlement in Svalbard, Pyramiden was named for the looming pyramid-shaped mountain that rises nearby. In the mid-1910s coal was discovered here and operations were set up by the same Swedish concern that exploited Sveagrava. In 1926 it was taken over by a Soviet firm, Russkiy Grumant, which sold out to the Soviet Trust Arktikugol, exploiters of Barentsburg, in 1931. In the 1950s there were as many as 2500 Russian residents, well exceeding the



population of Longyearbyen today. During its productive heyday in the early 1990s it had 60km of shafts, 130 homes, agricultural enterprises similar to those in Barentsburg and the world's most northerly hotel and swimming pool.

In the late 1990s the mine no longer yielded enough coal to be profitable, Russia was no longer willing or able to subsidise the mine and Pyramiden was abandoned in 1998. Various Longyearbyen-based tour agencies offer 10-hour day cruises to Pyramiden (adult/child Nkr1090/790) or you can scoot along on a winter snowmobile safari (adult/child Nkr2450/1500).

## NY ÅLESUND

pop 30-130

Despite its inhospitable latitude (79°N), you'd be hard pressed to find a more awesome backdrop anywhere on earth than the scientific post of Ny Ålesund, 107km north-west of Longyearbyen. Founded in 1916 by the Kings Bay Kull Compani, Ny Ålesund likes to claim that it's the world's northernmost permanently inhabited civilian community (although you could make a case for three other equally minuscule spots in Russia and Canada).

Throughout much of the 20th century Kings Bay mined for coal. As many as 300 people once lived and worked here but, after the last of several lethal explosions resulted in 21 deaths, mining stopped in 1963. Ny Ålesund has since recycled itself as a prominent scientific post with research stations of several nations, including Japan, France, the British Antarctic Survey and, since July 2004, China (bizarrely in this land of polar bears and Arctic foxes, two marble lions stand watch over the Chinese quarters). India's first team was about to arrive when we were last on Svalbard. There's a hardy year-round population of around 30 scientists, rising to 130 in summer (never more since that's the number of beds available) as researchers from about 15 countries fly in.

## Sights

There's a 1.5km trail with multilingual interpretive panels that takes you around the main sites of this tiny settlement.

In the early 20th century several polar explorers set off from Ny Ålesund, including the likes of Roald Amundsen, Lincoln Ellsworth,

Admiral Byrd and Umberto Nobile. The **anchor pylon** was used by Nobile and Amundsen to launch the airship *Norge* on their successful flight over the pole to Alaska in 1926; it came in handy again two years later, when Nobile returned to launch the *Italia* on his ill-fated repeat attempt. You'll see **memorials** to these missions around town.

Perhaps the most unusual sight is the stranded **steam locomotive** near the dock. In 1917 a narrow-gauge railway was constructed to connect the coalfields with the harbour and it remained in use until 1958. The restored locomotive is, naturally, the world's northernmost railway relic.

The town also supports a neat little **Mine Museum** (Gruvemuseum; donation suggested; ☎ 24hr) in the old Tiedemann's Tabak (tobacco) shop, relating the coal-mining history of this area.

All non-professional visitors arrive in Ny Ålesund on tourist cruises and linger for an hour or two.

## AROUND NY ÅLESUND Kongsfjorden

Ny Ålesund's backdrop, Kongsfjorden (the namesake for the Kings Bay Kull Compani), spectacularly contrasts bleak grey-brown shores with expansive white icefields. The distinctive Tre Kroner peaks, Dana (1175m), Svea (1226m) and Nora (1226m) – named in honour of Denmark, Sweden and Norway, respectively – jut from the ice and are among Svalbard's most recognisable landmarks.

## Blomstrandhalvøya

Gravelly Blomstrandhalvøya was once a peninsula but, in the early 1990s, it was released from the icy grip on its northern end and it's now an island. In summer the name Blomstrand, or 'flower beach', would be appropriate, but it was in fact named for a Norwegian geologist. Ny London, at the southern end of the island, recalls one Ernest Mansfield of the Northern Exploration Company who attempted to quarry marble in 1911 only to discover that the stone had been rendered worthless by aeons of freezing and thawing. A couple of buildings and some forlorn machinery remain.

## AROUND SPITSBERGEN Sveagrava

Coal was first discovered at Sveagrava in the early 1910s and exploited by a Swedish

## ROALD AMUNDSEN

If Fridtjof Nansen (see the boxed text, p351) had the biggest heart of any polar explorer, fellow Norwegian Roald Amundsen had the most determination and grit. Born into a family of shipowners and captains in 1872 at Borge, near Sarpsborg, he dreamed of becoming a polar explorer and devoured every bit of literature he could find on the subject. Following his mother's wishes, he dutifully studied medicine, but when she died in 1893 he returned to his polar dreams and never looked back.

By 1897 he was sailing to the Antarctic as first mate on the Belgian *Belgica* expedition. Their ship froze fast in the ice near Peter I Island and became – unintentionally – the first expedition to overwinter in the Antarctic. When the captain fell ill with scurvy, Amundsen took command, displaying his ability in a crisis.

Having gained a reputation as a captain, Amundsen set his sights on the Northwest Passage and study of the Magnetic North Pole. The expedition set out from Oslo in June 1903 aboard the 47-tonne sloop *Gjøa* and overwintered in a natural harbour on King William Island, which they named Gjøahavn. For two years they built observatories, took magnetic readings establishing the position of the Magnetic North Pole, studied the lives of the Inuit and learned how to drive dog teams. By August 1905 they emerged into waters that had been charted from the west, becoming the first vessel to navigate the Northwest Passage. When the *Gjøa* again froze fast in the ice, Amundsen and an American companion set off by dog-sled to the telegraph station at Eagle, Alaska, over 900km away, to announce their success.

Amundsen had wanted to be the first man to reach the North Pole, but in April 1909 Robert Peary took that honour. So in 1910 Amundsen headed instead for the South Pole, only to learn that Britain's Robert Falcon Scott's *Terra Nova* expedition was setting out from New Zealand with the same goal.

Amundsen's ship dropped anchor in January 1911 at Roosevelt Island, 60km closer to the South Pole than Scott's base. With four companions and four 13-dog sleds, Amundsen reached the South Pole on 14 December 1911. Scott – who, together with four members of his expedition, died of cold and starvation on the return journey – arrived on 17 January 1912 to discover the Norwegian flag already flying.

In 1925 Amundsen attempted to become the first to fly over the North Pole. The American Lincoln Ellsworth sponsored the expedition and two planes took off from Svalbard bound for Alaska, but faulty equipment forced them to land on sea ice about 150km from the pole. The pilot, Hjalmar Riiser-Larsen, hewed a runway with hand tools, managed to take off with all six crew members and returned one plane to Nordaustlandet, in Svalbard, where they ditched at sea but were rescued.

Never one to give up, Amundsen tried again the following year aboard the airship *Norge*, this time with Ellsworth, Riiser-Larsen and the Italian explorer Umberto Nobile. They left Spitsbergen on 11 May 1926 and, 16 hours later, dropped the Norwegian, American and Italian flags on the North Pole. On 14 May they landed triumphantly at Teller, Alaska, having flown 5456km in 72 hours – the first ever flight between Europe and North America.

In May 1928 Nobile attempted another expedition in the airship *Italia* and, when it crashed in the Arctic, Amundsen joined the rescue. Although Nobile and his crew were subsequently rescued, Amundsen's last signals were received just three hours after takeoff. His body has never been found.

company. The colliery changed hands several times, survived a fire and was yielding 400,000 tonnes of coal annually by the time SNSK took it over in 1934. The operations were levelled by a submarine attack in 1944 but activity snapped back after the war and by the late 1970s Sveagrava had grown into a settlement of 300 workers.

Over the following years increased production around more-accessible Longyearbyen led to a decline at the original Sveagrava pit; and by the mid-1990s it had dwindled to just a handful of miners and administrators. Nowadays, the nearby Svea Nord (see p371) has taken over its mantle and is one of Europe's biggest producing mines.

### Magdalenefjord

The lovely blue-green bay of Magdalenefjord in Nordvest Spitsbergen, flanked by towering peaks and intimidating tidewater glaciers, is the most popular anchorage along Spitsbergen's western coast. In the 17th century, this area saw heavy Dutch whaling; at Graveneset, near the mouth of the fjord, you can still see the remains of two stoves used to boil the blubber. There are numerous protected graves of 17th- and mid-18th-century whalers.

### Prins Karls Forlandet

On the west coast of Spitsbergen, the oddly shaped 86km-long island of Prins Karls Forlandet is a national park set aside to protect breeding walrus, seals and sea lions.

### Krossfjorden

Thanks to Lillehöökreen (its grand tide-water glacier) and several cultural relics, Krossfjorden also attracts quite a few cruise ships. At Ebeltoftbukta, near the mouth of the fjord, you can see several whalers' graves as well as a heap of leftover junk from a 1912 German telegraph office that was shifted wholesale to Ny Ålesund after only two years of operation. Opposite the entrance rise some crowded bird cliffs overlooking one of Svalbard's most verdant spots, with flowers, moss and even grasses.

### Danskøya

One of the most intriguing sites in northwest Spitsbergen is Virgohamna, on the bleak, gravelly island of Danskøya, where the remains of several broken dreams now lie scattered across the lonely beach. Among them are the ruins of three blubber stoves from a 17th-century whaling station, as well as eight stone-covered graves from the same era. You'll also find the remains of a cottage built by English adventurer Arnold Pike, who sailed north in

his yacht *Siggen* and spent a winter subsisting on polar bears and reindeer.

The next adventurer at Virgohamna was Swedish engineer Salomon August Andréé, who in the summer of 1897 set off from Virgohamna in an airship, hoping to reach the North Pole. The fate of his expedition wasn't known until 1930, when sailors from a seal-hunting ship put ashore and stumbled across their last site on Kvitøya.

Then, in 1906, journalist Walter Wellman, who was sponsored by a US newspaper, attempted to reach the North Pole in an airship but failed. Next year, when he returned to try again, his ship was badly damaged in a storm. On his third attempt, in 1909, he floated to within 60km of the pole, met with technical problems and gave up for good; mainly because he'd heard that Robert Peary had already reached the pole anyway. All of the remaining junk (including dozens of rusted 44-gallon fuel drums) is protected. Erosion damage, caused by the few visitors who manage to get here, has been considerable so do the right thing and stick strictly to the marked paths.

### Amsterdamøya & Fairhaven

The island of Amsterdamøya was the site of the large Smeerenburg (meaning 'blubber town' in Dutch) whaling station. Co-founded in 1617 by Dutch and Danish concerns, all that remains of it today are seven ovens and some graves. There are more whalers' graves, scattered around the nearby sound, Fairhaven.

### Moffen Island

Most tourist cruises attempt to approach flat, gravelly Moffen Island, known for its walrus population, but are often turned back by pack or drift ice. In any case, between mid-May and mid-September, boats are not allowed to approach within 300m of the island, lest they disturb the walrus' breeding activities.

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