SVALBARD
A 21 DAY POLAR BEAR SPECIAL
JULY 24 - AUGUST 13, 2017, ON BOARD M/S MALMÖ
TOUR REPORT
PARTICIPANTS

Guides & Charterers:
Morten Joergensen
Nozomi Takeyabu

Expedition Leader:
Rinie van Meurs

Crew:
Bengt Wiman, Captain
Christian Cederberg, Chef
Dan Leirvik, AB
Joachim Reif, Chief Officer
Johan Uddebrant, Chief Engineer
Leo Krantz, Steward
Mathias Lindau, AB
Sofia Heller, Stewardess

Guests:
Derek Holwill, UK
Eva Ferguson, UK
Graham Boulnois, UK
Jack Preston, USA
Jenny Varley, UK
John Hoffman, USA
Kiki Kaziraz, FR
Lara Ferraro, USA
Nolwenn Hadet, FR
Scot Ferraro, USA

Derek Holwill, UK
Eva Ferguson, UK
Graham Boulnois, UK
Jack Preston, USA
Jenny Varley, UK
John Hoffman, USA
Kiki Kaziraz, FR
Lara Ferraro, USA
Nolwenn Hadet, FR
Scot Ferraro, USA
This extremely special 20-night voyage is destined to become legendary. It was hatched as a brain-child of Richard Barrett some two years earlier, and blue-printed between him, NozoMojo, Rinie van Meurs and ship operators Master Mariner. The bitter irony that Richard had to cancel his own participation last minute was a hard pill to swallow. The 10 other guests, the guides, and the crew of the M/S Malmö went ahead with the execution of what became an epic voyage. Photographing Polar Bears on ice was the goal. Three weeks later, all participants came back with 10,000’s of all manner of images of just that. 52 Polar Bears total, 48 of which were on ice (!), of which no less than 42 right by the ship; five family groups including one single cub-of-the-year (COY), three set of two COY’s and one set of three yearlings (one of which proved to be adopted!); four cases of bears on four different whale carcasses, two scenes of concentrations of Polar Bears on Narwhals (respectively six on a female carcass and 16 on a male carcass), and two scenes of a single bear on two different Sperm Whales. In addition, we had a super evening with no less than 11 Blue Whales feeding, of which five appeared right on the bow or next to the ship. And much else. With the focus so hard on the pack-ice experience, obviously the number of birds was low, with relatively few sightings of land or coastal species. A complete list of species sighted (21 birds and 11-13 mammals) appears at the end of this report. We travelled a total of 1,621 nautical miles.
July 24:

Winds light to nil, +/- 10°C (50°F), sunny all day, clear.
Longyearbyen - Isfjorden - Forlandssundet

It was a warm day to begin our voyage – almost t-shirt weather, balmy, mild, sunny, clear, bright.

Some had spent several days here, some just arrived on the night flight and had a short sleep, but come late morning, we were all assembled outside the hotel for the luggage transfer. And at 04.00 pm, everyone arrived at the M/S Malmö, tied up on the floating dock next to all manner of yachts and small local boats. Even the missing luggage from the night flight arrived.

During the next hours, we milled around on board, settled into our cabins, and at 05.00 pm we had a long, thorough introduction to the crew, to the safety features of the vessel and procedures in case of an emergency, and to the guides. We were due to bunker fuel for our long voyage just after 06.00 pm, and in the meantime, our poor engineer was kept busy with electrical and technical issues to be solved. Chef Christian introduced our first evening meal, and just after 08.30 pm, we were away.

During dinner, Rinie briefly mentioned an idea for tomorrow's activities, a plan A, but also reminded all that we were here to seize the opportunities as they present themselves, not to follow a plan. So we would be working with and around weather and wildlife, staying flexible, and being alert for changes to plans at any given moment, as well as knocks on our cabin doors at any potential time of day or “night”. We would begin by heading out through Isfjorden, turning to starboard into Forlandssundet, and then overnight aiming for Magdalenefjorden sometime tomorrow late morning.
July 25:

Winds light to nil, +/- 9°C (48°F), partial cloud but mostly sunny, very clear.
Magdalenefjorden - Smeerenburgfjorden - Virgohamna/Smeerenburg

Through half the night, and through half of today, Johan and his aides kept working until our plumbing issues were solved, well done!

We all met, after breakfast, for a quick array of briefings thrown into one – all about environmentally sound travel, Zodiac operations and Polar Bear safety measures. Not long after that, we had entered Magdalenefjorden, and the overcast conditions changed into scattered cloud with a lot of sun. The day warmed up, and we warmed to the day.

Come 11.00 am, we were standing on a sandy beach, watching 20 male Walrus snoozing, with the most awesome backdrop of glaciers, mountains and sea. An hour later, half went for a short Zodiac cruise to photograph some Puffins and other good birds, while the rest stayed with the Walrus. At one point, one woke from its deep sleep (snoring audibly), got a fright and spooked all its companions, so they all took to the water’s edge. We moved away and took to the boat, continuing to watch from the water side as the animals relaxed again.

After lunch, we had a ship’s cruise past the Smeerenburg glacier, in wonderful warm sunny weather, before we late afternoon took the Zodiaccs to a little cove off Virgohamnna, where Harbour Seals hang out. Today, it was quiet, but some 7+ animals eventually showed themselves, often posing or passing very near the boats. On the way back to Malmö, we stopped for a while off Smeerenburg, where some 100+ male Walrus were hauled out, and one old gentleman arrived in the water to have a scratch in the shallows.

It was still sunny, a bit cooler, with light north-easterlies, as we proceeded towards the Seven Islands in the evening.
July 26:

Windless all day, +/- 4°C (39°F), sunny and extremely clear all day with only wisps of cloud. Due W of Sjuøyane (Seven Islands) - just SE of them, in pack-ice varying from 3/10 to 9/10 cover.

Overnight, we came a long way to the north-east, and during the day today, we travelled further east at a north latitude of more or less 80°40’ all day. We arrived at the first quite open pack-ice just before breakfast, and at just after 10.00 pm we shut down for the night, surrounded by 9/10 pack-ice.

In the meantime, we had one of the most beautiful days imaginable in the pack-ice, with very high visibility and bright sun all day, and pristine white ice-floes all around. Kittiwakes and Fulmars were with us in small numbers throughout the day, a few auks and terns as well, and we had brief visits from Arctic Skua (aka Parasitic Jaeger), a Great Skua and one Ivory Gull. All through the day also, there were scattered Bearded Seals in singles and scattered Harp Seals in small groups, while only a few Ringed Seals were seen.

About an hour before lunch, we approached a handsome Bearded Seal, affording a nice photography opportunity. A while later, the ship was directed towards a distant yellow speck, which turned out to be a handsome young adult male Polar Bear. Lunch was delayed, and we were all on deck, as we attempted to get close to the bear. He, however, was on a mission, and although fully aware of our presence, the bear preferred to ignore us and walked past us on the ice. His pace being faster across the ice than ours could be through it, we soon gave up on following him further.

Early afternoon, we saw a ghost net. We fished it out of the sea and thus prevented it from potentially being a death trap for some marine mammal. It was identified as having come recently from a Norwegian shrimp trawler. Whoever left that net in the sea broke the law.

Through the afternoon and early evening, we passed between Parry Island to our south and Phipps Island to our north, and continued in the ice, with lovely light and pleasant weather. We were at 80°35’ N, 21°30’ E, when the engines were killed for the night.
July 27:

Windless all day, +/- 2°C (36°F), overcast, dense fog until just after breakfast, then very clear all day.
Just SE of Sjuøyane (Seven Islands) - just NE of them at 81° N, in pack-ice varying from 6/10 to 9/10 cover.

In the early morning, not many of us thought we were going to have such a nice day. The fog had come down heavy around 02.00 am, and at the beginning of breakfast, visibility was still very low. But it cleared rather suddenly, then only once dimmed in again briefly - and the rest of the day, we had superb visibility once again, but in a completely different light than yesterday, with a leaden sky above us all day. The winds being practically nil all day, only light southerly afternoon and turning to east, but still light, in the evening, we had excellent sailing and viewing conditions.

The usual suspects in seals and birds were around, none in large numbers, and our vigil for bears continued all day. Around lunch-time, we were rewarded the first time, when a distant bear was spotted, and which we painstakingly made our way towards, until we had close views of it near 03.00 pm. It was another adult male, in fine condition, albeit with a limp on the front paw. He showed no interest in us, and although he let us come fairly close, he decided eventually to saunter off. While watching him, another very distant bear was spotted, but too distant for us to catch up with. Come late afternoon, again a new bear was spotted, and again we took ages to get close, easing our way on a path that would cut in front of the bear as it strode south. Once we came upwind of this bear, it gave us one look and swam off.

Thus ended a long and beautiful day in the ice, at 81° N latitude, with traditional Swedish pea-soup and pancakes, and a birthday cake for Nozomi.
July 28:

Winds light mostly N, -1 to +1°C (30-34°F), overcast, foggy morning, then clearing with good visibility until increasingly misty mid-afternoon to evening, after dinner again clear. Light snowfall afternoon.
All day NE of Sjuøyane (Seven Islands), at approximately 81°03’ N and 22°35’ E.

It was noticeably colder today, with a light wind from the north, evidence of light snowfall from the night on deck, and moody, grey conditions. We had drifted in a perfect arch overnight, first north and east, then south and west, and were almost back at the same spot. From here, we started our search again, after breakfast.

Soon afterwards, a bear or two were seen far in the ice towards the east. We began heading there, through very dense pack, and the two bears turned out to be three, then four, then five. And they were on a kill. Or on something … By the time we were close, we had concluded that we were seeing five Polar Bears around the remains of a Narwhal! And a sixth bear soon came running, from downwind, to join in.

We spent the next nine hours watching this truly amazing scene. Five adult male Polar Bears, three of which were decidedly fat, one “normal” and one thin, and one young adult, “normal” female, around the carcass. Around the kill were at all times also gulls in attendance, some 20+ Glaucous Gulls and 12 adult Ivory Gulls. Sometimes, three bears were feeding shoulder to shoulder. At other times, only one fed at a time, while the others stretched, yawned and snoozed nearby. The female kept her distance for some hours, but eventually she too had a feed. We fired up the engines twice, to reposition the ship when we had drifted away, then killed them again. One of the times, we drifted so close that the carcass with the thin bear feeding on it passed right under the bow.

During the day, the good vessel “Havsel” was invited to join in the scene. They had a BBC film crew on board, and there was enough space to share the experience. As the evening progressed, the mist closed in heavier, and we relaxed indoors, warming up, having dinner, having drinks, and having a good chat about our good fortune.
July 29:

Winds light to moderate N swinging to WNW evening, +/- 0°C (32°F), overcast, visibility varying between good and moderate. Morning NE of Sjuøyane (Seven Islands), at approximately 80°57’ N and 22°30’ E. Afternoon cutting through pack-ice on a S-bound course towards Rijpfjorden.

Overnight, we had drifted some six miles in a generally southerly direction. The ice had drifted about four, so the carcass and bears were only just two miles from us, visible during breakfast. We cruised back up and parked near the scene for the morning, enjoying watching the still present five male bears. The scene was quiet, peaceful, almost with an after-party sort of atmosphere. Bears dozing, walking around slowly, peeing and pooping, nibbling at the scraps. Even the gulls (there were now 16 Ivory Gulls) seemed content with mostly just standing around or lying on the ice, seemingly asleep.

Come lunchtime, what with the limited visibility and some of the bears having moved off, we started up and began picking our way towards the south. Our progress was very slow as the Chief Officer pushed the floes apart and picked his way through. Visibility remained rather poor most of the day, and most of us napped or caught up on some editing. Towards evening, our Captain took over the wheel. As the fog began clearing, a clear, white fog-bow was visible for a good long time on our port side. After dinner, the ice changed character, and we got into some huge, unbroken areas of solid ice, impenetrable with our mere 500 horse powers. We turned and aimed a bit further west instead. By 09.00 pm, we had parked in more solid ice, but near the edge, and the evening turned beautiful as the fog retreated to the horizon and the skyline of the Seven Islands as well as Nordaustlandet.
July 30:

Winds moderate WNW to light W, -2 to 0°C (28-32°F), overcast morning and partly cloudy afternoon, visibility excellent. SE of Sjuøyane (Seven Islands) - through the islands - W of the islands, then evening - Hinlopen Strait. All day in pack-ice between 6/10 and 9/10.

Before breakfast, we spotted a bear wandering across the ice to the north of the ship. It took us several hours to get close to it, it was moving fast in various directions, and the ice did not allow a direct approach. By the time we got close enough to the bear to see that it was a big, fat, greasy adult male, it reacted by running from us. So much for our 11th bear.

We continued through the morning, picking our way towards the Seven Islands, and just before and after lunch, we stopped for a while near a patch of ice with a small group of female Walrus on it. Most of them vanished, but one female with a yearling calf remained and allowed for good views while the ship drifted nearer.

The sky gradually opened up over the afternoon, and we had sunshine part of the time, as we scanned the heavy pack-ice to the west of the Seven Islands. It was a bitterly cold day, but the visibility was really good, and the cloud formations beautiful - the wildlife however remained elusive, we only saw a few seals and a few birds and no further bears. Come evening time, we found a way out of the ice and proceeded towards the north end of Hinlopen Strait. Our original plans to try for Rijpfjorden and Duvefjorden were not to be this time around, instead we would be heading counter-clockwise around Nordaustlandet, towards the easternmost parts of Svalbard.
July 31:

Winds moderate to strong NW, easing evening, 0-3°C (32-37°F), scattered high cloud, visibility good.
Alkefjellet in Hinlopen Strait - Torellneset on Nordaustlandet - Bråsvellbreen

We cruised Alkefjellet by ship this morning. The sheer cliffs are home to several hundred thousand birds, most of them Brünnich’s Guillemots (aka Thick-billed Murres), but also thousands of Black-legged Kittiwakes and hundreds of Glaucous Gulls. Looming above like the towers of ancient castles, the rocks provide countless horizontal ledges for the auks to lay their eggs on. The direct access to the sea below makes this an ideal nesting site. The quantities of birds everywhere, on the rocks, in the water, and in the air, provide ample evidence.

Captain Bengt steered us past the cliff along almost the entire length about three times over the course of almost two hours. The sun was mostly on the cliff faces, sometimes a cloud changed the lighting. It was a great occasion to see one of Svalbard’s major natural history spectacles.

The next three hours passed quickly as we enjoyed the views on either side of the Hinlopen Strait. Before lunch, we did a quick circumnavigation of a small island that was rumoured to have a dead whale on its shores. We didn’t see it. But we did see 250-300 Walrus hauled out on the gravel spit called Torellneset, on Nordaustlandet, and we all headed in to secure the Zodiac on the shore and walk towards the haul-out. It was very pleasant indeed out of the wind, it felt almost warm there at the water’s edge. We were evidently downwind from the haul-out. The amount of animals and the fact that they were spread out in three groups made a close approach slightly tricky, and with the sun inevitably behind the animals no matter where we would position ourselves, we opted to keep a greater distance and just relax and enjoy.
Half of us went for a walk along the beach, and eventually a bit inland, gaining some altitude, and stretching some leg muscles. The other half lingered. Both groups eventually had very close encounters with several small groups of male Walrus that came along the beach from the east, apparently to join their friends ashore. It was a relaxed, delightful, sunny and most pleasant afternoon excursion.

Onwards, over the next three hours, towards Bråsvellbreen, the famed corner of the majestic Austfonna, where all the waterfalls come gushing off the glacier’s front during the summer months. After dinner, we spent a gorgeous couple of hours just off the glacier wall, photographing the many waterfalls, with the sun perfectly back-lighting some of the best of them. Fulmars and Kittiwakes were gliding by, casting large shadows on the ice wall. The cloud formations added their bit to the drama of the scene.

Those who stayed up enjoyed increasing densities of icebergs as we proceeded east under a clear sky and on a still sea.
Aug 1:

Winds light variable to nil, overcast, 1-3°C (34-37°F), visibility good to moderate, light drizzle on and off from 11.00 am until 04.00 pm. In the pack-ice N of the western part of Kong Karl’s Land.

What a day!

It was perfectly calm almost all day, but still chilly because of the damp conditions. Mostly the visibility was great, and the reflections of the ice in the water and the birds too were great. Also some of our bears were beautifully reflected at times.

Mid-morning, the first bear was spotted. An adult female in a fine condition, she allowed us to approach fairly close. She was not interested in us, but also not intimidated. She got up a couple of times, moved a little, then had another snooze. The next bear was also a female, spotted far ahead, and she was motoring. She was heading east, at a consistent good pace, and although we did catch up with her, we let her be, as she was not only disinterested, but also clearly on a mission, and swimming much of the time.

The third bear of the day turned out to be a prize encounter. A large, healthy male bear, nick-named “Fang” because of his cut lip on the left side, exposing his canine. He was curious, and he came over to inspect us. He walked right up, and he gave us a prolonged experience with him, lying right next to the ship, at the edge of the ice, his reflection almost as clear as he himself. What a magnificent beast. Eventually, he plodded off some 50 meters and went back to resting.

As we continued eastward in the afternoon, we spotted another distant bear. Which turned out to be three bears – a healthy looking female with her two extremely cute, and quite fat, COY’s. She was walking at a fair speed across dense ice, but with Captain Bengt’s help, we managed to get a good view of the family group as they passed in front of the ship before they continued out of reach. While we were parked there, we spotted another two bears off to the east, bringing today’s total to eight Polar Bears – of which we were able to take endless amounts of photos of five. It was very quiet outside, still, calm, pristine, as we dined and celebrated our “catch”. We had obviously found a “hot-spot”, with eight bears seen within a distance of less than 20 miles – no reason to go anywhere else straight away, we would continue our search from here tomorrow.
Aug 2:

Winds light variable to nil, overcast morning with clouds gradually scattering and increasingly sunny, 1-4°C (32-39°F), visibility good to excellent with fog coming in at 10.00 pm. In the pack-ice N of the central part of Kong Karl's Land, drifting east.

What a day!!

After breakfast, we began once again cruising through the dense pack-ice. Our first course was north, because a Polar Bear had been seen there, walking towards the east. We never found it again. But we continued searching, all through the morning, and the lack of more bears was plentifully made up for by the superb weather, causing all manner of wonderful reflections and views, as well as the company we had of birds. Numerous Kittiwakes were with us all day, catching the Polar Cod that our crashing through the ice exposed to bird’s eye view. Along with the Kittiwakes were usually a few Glaucous Gulls, plumage stages of all age groups present among them. Also a few Ivory Gulls were in attendance all day. One Long-tailed and a few Pomarine Skuas / Jaegers also passed by.

It was just coming up to lunchtime when the next first bear was spotted. It was still hunting on a large floe, further east. We headed there, having to force our way through very heavy ice to get there. Before even getting to that first bear, we had already established that beyond it, there were several more, at least three, possibly four, all within a small area, seemingly feeding.

The rest is history. We came upon a scene complete with nine bears (with that first still-hunting one coming over later to complete the number 10). Three females, of which two were adult and severely bloated, the third very young and petite. Seven males, of which three were fully adult and very fat too, the rest younger and mostly well fed, with only one showing signs of being thin - but with a full belly never-the-less (he later became known as Brutus for his body proportions and his tendency to give us a mean stare). The cause of all these bears being concentrated here was the carcass of an adult male Narwhal, complete with a two-meter tusk. The head was severed from the backbone, and part of the carcass obviously half-sunken into a pool in the middle of the ice-floe. Strips of skin and blubber lay about.
Over the next nine hours, we observed everything we wanted to on the floe. Bears sleeping, pooping, walking, rolling, fighting, eating, drinking, growling. Dominant bears, submissive bears, indifferent bears, socializing bears. Bears that could hardly walk without losing their breath, panting and almost falling asleep on their feet. One bear that broke through the ice, surprised no doubt by her own weight gain. After observing from the decks on the ship for about six hours, we had a quick dinner and then spent the next almost three hours in the Zodiacs, getting close-up views of all the bears and all their behaviours. Around 10.00 pm, the vessel had drifted from the ice-floe (nicknamed “bear island”), and a thick fog came rolling in from the north at the same time - providing the perfect excuse for us all to stop observing and photographing and begin having a celebration drink or two instead.
Aug 3:

Winds light to moderate SW veering S late evening, overcast, 2-0°C (36-32°F), visibility good. 
In the pack-ice N of the central part of Kong Karl’s Land, drifting further east.

What a day !!!

We had drifted but a mile or so from the bears overnight, and with a great visibility in the morning, it was not hard to reposition back up to the floe. In our absence, one more had joined the party - now at 11 bears strong.

Of particular interest during our first three hours of observation today was the interaction between one of the mature males and one of the sub-adult males (joined for a while by a second sub-adult). The older bear was gradually persuaded into a game by the younger one. The sub-adult kept provoking the older, then backing off each time the older reacted. Eventually, the older managed to push the younger into the water. But still the game continued, and the temptation to get in as well eventually got the better of the older bear, and he purposefully broke through the ice underneath his own feet, tumbling in as a result. Over the next more than one hour, they played in the water, towards the end joined by a third bear as well.

Another memorable scene was the same provocative sub-adult playing with the unfortunate Narwhal’s penis, which it found and picked up under water in a puddle. It proceeded to swing the flesh around for a good long while, throwing it a few times, and even managing to wrap it around its own face a couple of times. Pure fun, and pure fun to watch too. And probably a scene no human being has ever witnessed before.
The winds picked up a bit over the morning, the chill was noticeable, and the ship also drifted out of position faster than yesterday. We repositioned a couple of times, and also at times took some minutes to warm up inside with coffee and similar.

Lunch was interrupted by the call that a female with cubs was approaching. We started up the engine, and independently there was a scattering of the “bear island” bears happening at the same time, with two of the adult males swimming or walking off in different directions. The female with two COY’s (not the same family as a couple of days earlier) decided the disturbance was too much and took off again. We then moved our vessel up to the M/S Freya which had in the meantime arrived in the area. We bunkered fresh water from them, and they shared the “bear island” experience with us.

After lunch, we headed towards the new family group, that had come a bit closer again. During the entire rest of the day, we enjoyed this female - with an old wound on her hind leg - and her charming COY’s. We were treated to several outstanding close encounters. The winds died gradually, and we had one of the most picture-perfect evenings imaginable in the drift ice.
The first time she came over, there was a lot of commotion on deck, and particularly one of the cubs was uneasy, whining loudly. The mother picked up a hat that had unfortunately been dropped overboard, then the trio bolted, and for a while we could watch the cubs playing tug-of-war with the hat.

The second time she came by the ship, it was for another brief investigation, after which she proceeded in the direction of the carcass. When one of the males there showed a bit too much interest, she returned, passing by our ship again, and seeking out a sheltered spot behind some ice piles nearby. Her cubs played for a good long time, while she rested nearby.

Long after we had parked the ship for the night, and she had parked her family for the night, and several of us had parked ourselves in our bunks for the night, the third magical encounter took place. “Malmö” drifted on her own accord right by the family. The cubs became a bit active with our passing right by, and this caused the female to eventually get up and take a last stroll under the midnight sun. She walked a circle on her large floe, eventually coming back towards the ship, at one stage all three of them perfectly reflected in the still waters with the fish-scale clouds of above mirrored as well.

Wow!
Aug 4:

Winds light S to nil, scattered cloud and sunny, but from noon dense fog, +/- 3°C (37°F) morning to +/- 1°C (34°F) evening, visibility great until noon.
In the pack-ice N of the eastern part of Kong Karl’s Land, still drifting east.

Late, around 09.30 am, we were again in position by “bear island”, the carcass floe - today with nine males on it. The scene was sleepy, again it had a kind of after-party feel to it - even more so than yesterday. The back-bone of the whale was now all but completely clean, and the ribs lay scattered around as evidence of the carnage. Most of the bears were even blacker on their butts and legs than before. Some of the bears were visibly heavier/thicker than two days ago.

During the morning, seven of the nine bear on the floe attended the carcass area, mostly peacefully ignoring each other despite sometimes almost physical contact, a couple of times growling and roaring a bit, but not with any strong emotion behind it. The prize performances came from three different bears that in turn came over to the ship: The large, fierce-looking Brutus walking up and down alongside, eyeing us all; a much younger and smaller, pretty one, posing by a blue puddle nearby; and a medium sized mature bear with a mild facial expression lying down by the ship and cleaning his paws, before meandering off again.

Before noon, the fog came in and gradually closed down the scene. The afternoon and evening were spent taking it very easy on board - editing, napping - and photographing from decks and from portholes the occasional Polar Bear that would wander over to check us out. We were getting a little blasé about it all ...
Aug 5:

Winds first nil, very light W at times in afternoon, by evening moderate NW. Overcast morning, afternoon sunny but dense fog, +/- 2°C (28°F), visibility great until foggy, lifting some evening.

In the pack-ice off the NE end of King Karl's Land, then N - Kvitøya (White Island)

The day began for most of us at 04.00 am, when we were woken up to the words “mother and cubs”. We came out on deck to witness a new – our third – family group arrive on the scene. She swam to “bear island”, then discovered what her nose had led her to – a floe with not just the smelly remains of a dead whale, but also with three large males still hanging around. She made a wide circle around the smelly part to see if she could access it from the other side – this brought her right by the side of the ship. Another perfect reflection moment. Then she swam off, her cubs leaping clear of the ice edge to follow her.

By morning (the “regular” morning time), there was just one of the “old” males left on “bear island” – this one fast asleep. Between 07.00 and 07.15 am, a couple of new bears arrived – a fat female and a normal size sub-adult male. They both spent a short while around the carcass area, but evidently could not find much at all, and before long they had swum off again. At one stage, the last remaining “old” bear from the feast slowly and deliberately stretched all of his four limbs one by one, then all together, then meticulously got up and departed. The floe was empty for the first time in perhaps a week, uninhabited but for a handful of Ivory and Glaucous Gulls.
Symbolically, as the last bear left the scene, the part of the ice floe that held the severed skull and tusk of the Narwhal split off from “bear island” and began drifting away. With the Governor’s permission, we launched the Zodiacs to salvage the head. We all marvelled at the specimen, as much as we had seen already from afar that it was whole and pretty, so much more did we now realize that this was a prize tusk - almost exactly two meters long (with skull 2.5 meters and 15 kg), straight, and complete with narrow polished tip. Wow!

We set a course for Kvitøya, White Island, and were all able to relax a bit, as the fog came down soon and caused limited visibility for the afternoon. Those who scanned counted some five to seven bears spread out over the area during the first 10 miles or so of our transect - we considered them all to be already “worked” bears and did not stop for them, nor add them to our tally.

In the late afternoon, with the sun directly behind us, we had nothing less than a triple fog-bow, forming a total and perfect circle in front on the vessel.

After dinner, we were at anchor off Andréeneset, on Kvitøya. The fog lifted enough for us to see land and to navigate to shore and walk up to the little monument that has been built on the site where Swedish Andrée and his men were found in 1930. A sobering experience to be there and to contemplate what it must have been like - but soon we were back in the comfort and warmth of our little “Malmö”.
Aug 6:

Winds light NW to nil, from 04.00 pm light S, overcast and until 04.00 pm mostly foggy, 2 to -2°C (36-28°F), visibility good from 04.00 pm.
Along White Island - S more or less along an edge of heavy pack-ice - SW into more open waters

Early this morning, just after 03.00 am, we had to heave anchor and sail away, as heavy duty ice-floes were closing on the ship. We continued all morning sailing along the southern side of Kvitøya, but mostly in thick fog. We were then turned around by solidly packed ice, then spent the rest of the day picking our way southward. The occasional fog-bow, and the occasional lifting of the fog, were all we really had out of the day, despite long hours of cold searching by the guides. After 04.00 pm, the wind shifted, and it cleared, but we were still in a rather dead zone.

After dinner, Captain Bengt was very proud when he found us the bear of the day. A pretty young female on a little pile of ice, next to a blue lake, with the rib remains of a Ringed Seal. A fine finish to a mostly slow day, and a very appropriate 42nd bear of the trip on Eva’s birthday.
Aug 7:

Winds light S until late afternoon when picking up to moderate SW, overcast and foggy but from late afternoon clearing and sunny, until foggy and overcast again evening, +/- 1°C (34°F). NE of Kong Karl’s Land in mostly open drift ice

Also today was mostly slow, with a cold feel to it. The fog was heavy most of the time. When it lifted temporarily just after lunch, we immediately spotted two Polar Bears. While we were approaching the nearer one, suddenly there was also birdlife - a gang of Pomarine Skuas / Jaegers, a few Ivory Gulls including a second-year bird, and a flurry of Kittiwakes.

The bear was a very young, and very pretty, and very active, and very inquisitive, female. She was moving a lot across the ice, and she came to us - right up to the port side of the ship, giving us yet another awesome experience. She didn’t stay too long, but what a beauty she was. We have been spoiled by the bears on this voyage! This was our 44th, and most of those we have seen exceptionally well!

After some further cruising in renewed heavy fog, it suddenly lifted, with the winds picking up a bit and adding a distinct bite to the air. The low sun provided beautiful colours on the ice and sea as we weaved our way first westward, later northbound. During dinner, the fog closed in again, then by the time it lifted, we were in almost open waters, and heading now out of this area near Kong Karl’s Land which had delivered big time during the last week.
Aug 8:

Winds light SSW, mostly overcast, +/- 4°C (39°F), clear until lunch-time, then foggy.
Up against a fairly solid ice-edge some 20 NM ESE of Isisøyane on Nordaustlandet - along Austfonna towards the W - Bråsveiullen - Arneset, Wahlbergeyaa

It was a mild morning, almost balmy compared to the latest days, when we began scanning across the compacted drift-ice edge to the north. With the sun behind us, and the light winds too, and with fine visibility, the prospects were good. It hadn’t been more than half an hour or so when a distant bear-coloured spot was seen. The ship was brought closer in, and the spot turned into a bear that turned into two, then three, then four bears – three yearlings with their mom! Wow!

Over the next four hours, we enjoyed another truly rare and amazing encounter, as the confident female paraded her young in front of us. Each clearly had distinct personalities, one more brave and adventurous, out on its own often and approaching the ship even before mom. Another staying back, calling anxiously for mom to stay with it. All three cubs were stained with fresh blood, the female hardly. She was in a good state, and all three cubs were chubby. One was noticeably larger than the other two.
Afterwards, there was a feeling on board of disbelief, of awe, and almost of exhaustion on board. We had seen so much already, how could we possibly have even dreamed of yet another top-class encounter, let alone one of this magnitude? It was once again almost with relief that we settled into an afternoon of fog and open ocean transit, we sensed a need to digest before being able to cope with much more …

On board, it was discovered through studies of photographs, that one of the four bears was ear-tagged, one of the cubs (the larger one). This led immediately to the thought that perhaps it was adopted! Later, through communications with the Norwegian Polar Institute’s Polar Bear program leader, Morten was able to establish that indeed this must be a case of adoption. Something extremely rarely documented, and never before in Svalbard.

The afternoon and evening passed - in slumber, in slumber, in a light rolling of the vessel. Our second visit to Bråsvellbreen was cancelled by the combination of swells, fog and sea-ice in front of the glacier. We continued towards southern Hinlopen Strait.
Aug 9:

Winds nil morning, afternoon moderate SW, evening light SW, +/- 4°C (39°F), fog and poor visibility until lunch, then clearing to partially cloudy with some sun.

Ardneset, Walhbergøya - Alkefjellet - Hinlopenrenna - Danskøya

A sleepy morning landscape met us today – no wind, no swell, no ice, almost no visibility. A sleepy gang of adult male Walrus on the beach, some 65+ (their number, not their age ...). We walked to them, watched them for a while, then we took the Zodiaks around them. A few arrived, scratching themselves at the water’s edge, or hauling themselves meticulously out and up. It was all slow motion, it was all peaceful, it was all very befitting the day.

During the late morning, we cruised through dense fog that was slowly thinning. There was a Minke Whale (Jack’s first ever, he had seen Bowheads and Narwhal, but never before a Minkel!). There were increasing amounts of birds. And then by early afternoon, we were once again at Alkefjellet, and did a slow ship’s cruise by the tens of thousands of noisy guillemots/murres. The light was very different this time, the sight equally amazing.

Later in the afternoon, a small Fin Whale showed briefly. Conditions in the northern part of Hinlopen Strait were not ideal, with local winds causing a slight swell and whitecaps. Once we had come out of the strait proper, the sea gradually calmed down.

It was after dinner, almost 09.30 pm, by the time we had the next whales. We were at the western edge of Hinloperenna, a deep trench that is the northern continuation of Hinlopen Strait. Nozomi spotted huge blows on the horizon. Could they be ...? Yes they were. A spectacular whale-watching evening pursued. By midnight, we had seen 11 Blue Whales, one Fin Whale and two Minke Whales. The Blue’s were awesome – five of them we saw really well, with first what was presumably a female with a large calf crossing the bow several times, later a trio including another female-calf pair not only surfacing right on the bow, but one of them doing a role over right next to the ship too. Scot asked with a grin on his face: How often do they wave?
Aug 10:

Winds light E to nil, +/- 4°C (39°F), overcast, fog coming and going all morning.

Danskøya - Smeerenburg glacier - Magdalenefjorden - Isfjorden

From the anchoring spot, we could see Walrus in one direction, and a whale carcass in the other direction, come later in the morning with a Polar Bear feeding on it. The damp conditions with low cloud was the cause for a very late start, but by 11.30 am, we were watching our 49th bear, a handsome and healthy young male, getting its head all red from the insides of the rather deflated Sperm Whale. After about half an hour, the bear wandered inland to poo, then lie down and rest (we’ve seen that behaviour a lot on this voyage).

We then took the two boats around the corner and spent a good and peaceful hour in the cove with nine Harbour Seals hauled out on their resting rocks, and among them a tiny juvenile, perhaps a very late birth of the season. We swung by the Walrus haul-out too, but soon headed to the comfort and warmth of our vessel.

After lunch, we searched for the female Polar Bear with one cub that had been reported further south in the fjord, but to no avail. Instead, we took the M/S Malmö into Björnfjorden and closer to the Smeerenburg glacier front. While we were there, surrounded by brash-ice and ice-bergs, the weather slowly but steadily cleared, and we had plenty opportunity to photograph the appearing glacier front and mountain backdrop. We picked up some glacier ice for the drinks - and we slowly turned the ship out again. As we passed into Sørgattet for the second time today, there they were - the “resident” female bear with her single COY. She has been visited by very many the last month, and the waters here are tricky at best - so it was decided to only enjoy views of her from deck.

A quick peek into Magdalenefjorden during dinner, and then underway all night to Isfjorden.
Aug 11:

Winds moderate NNE to E, afternoon moderate to strong S, then easing again, +/- 10°C (50°F), mostly overcast with some sun in the morning, almost no cloud late afternoon and evening, clear.
Alkhornet - Colesbukta - Forlandssundet

It was warm – very warm this morning. After a leisurely breakfast, we went ashore under the impressive peak called Alkhornet, the thousands of Kittiwakes loud and active. Our goal was Arctic Fox, but they remained elusive at this location. We spotted one, an adult, high on the hill, but did not find the den site. We did have a long walk, a good stretch of legs after our many days on board, and we enjoyed the lush tundra plain, the Arctic Skua / Parasitic Jaeger near its nest, and not least the many endemic Svalbard Reindeer. A large stag with an impressive set of antlers, and a female with her calf of the year, were among the more photographed animals. Come lunchtime, we were on board and hearing the plan for the afternoon.

At 04.00 pm, we anchored in Colesbukta. It was sheltered from the east and still very warm. The winds picked up during our visit, but we were sheltered – and the sun came out as well. The foxes were once again elusive, not at all at their known den site. Instead, most of us did a long walk around the area, searching for wildlife – photographing more Reindeer - and enjoying the colours of the landscape – exactly in the transition right now between the summer greens and the autumn yellows and reds. A few of us spent the time photographing the abandoned Russian coalmining buildings.
Aug 12:

Winds strong E & NE, easing evening, +/- 10°C (50°F), mostly sunny morning and overcast afternoon and evening, clear.
Tordenskjoldbukta - Colesbukta - Longyearbyen

We were back up in Forlandssundet, and went ashore this morning to try at the third location straight to see if we could be so lucky as to find a “workable” Arctic Fox or more. It was warm and sunny, but windy. The rock formations were lovely, and there was some good birdlife around, including Ringed Plover and Great Black-backed Gulls. Then, while the search for fox was still ongoing, a Polar Bear was spotted resting at the north end of the bay.

We took the Zodiaks across and got some glimpses of him, but before we got there, a rescue helicopter had flown over, seen the bear and circled back, which had caused him to move a little inland and behind some rocks. He stood up once, and we saw him - and we also saw why he is lingering in the area - a large, male Sperm Whale lay long dead a little inland from the beach, in a creek. The irony of it! - our 4th whale carcass and our 52nd bear - but no fox.

The mandatory timings of the trip’s end, and the weather as it was happening and forecast to last all day and night, made our last decision inevitable. We left Tordenskjoldbukta after lunch and braved the bumpy ride back to Colesbukta for one last attempt at a good fox and for a sheltered spot for the evening meal. It was a slightly bumpy ride across Isfjorden, but not too bad at all. Rinie scouted the landing site again at Colesbukta, while everyone stood by - but no, the foxes were not at the den.

We all met for our final dinner on board, while the ship was taken to Longyearbyen, and before we knew it, this majorly special voyage was coming to an end.
Birds

**Red-throated Diver/Loon:** 1 flying over at Virgohamna August 10.

**Northern Fulmar:** Numerous or in moderate numbers daily.

**Pink-footed Goose:** 41 total on 2 days.

**Barnacle Goose:** 51 total on 3 days.

**Common Eider:** Almost daily, largest flock 20+ at Virgohamna August 10.

**Ringed Plover:** 1 foraging at Tordenskjoldbukta August 12.

**Purple Sandpiper:** Ca. 45 seen on 5 occasions, almost all on the N and W side of Spitsbergen.

**Arctic Skua/Parasitic Jaeger:** A few most days, 20+ registered total.

**Long-tailed Skua/Jaeger:** One adult flying over in the pack-ice north of Kong Karl’s Land on August 2.

**Pomarine Skua/Jaeger:** This non-breeder is mostly seen in the pack-ice. We recorded ca. 70 total (largest flock 15) between August 1 and August 8 in the pack-ice between Nordaustlandet and Kong Karl’s Land.

**Great Skua:** 2 seen in the pack-ice, one as far north as 80°44’ N on July 26.

**Glaucous Gull:** Numerous or in moderate numbers daily, the highest concentration 80+ on August 4 at the male Narwhal carcass in the pack-ice.

**Great Black-backed Gull:** 5+ seen at Tordenskjoldbukta August 12, including at the Sperm Whale carcass.

**Black-legged Kittiwake:** Numerous or in moderate numbers daily.

**Ivory Gull:** 124+ seen total. Over 4 days in the northern pack-ice we registered 31+ adults, most of these at the female Narwhal carcass (highest concentration 16 on July 29). In the south-eastern pack-ice, we registered 87+ individuals, of which one was an immature. No juveniles seen. The highest concentrations were 20+ at the male Narwhal carcass on August 3 and 4.

**Arctic Tern:** Seen with a few daily in the pack-ice and higher numbers in the fjords.

**Brünnich’s Guillemot/Thick-billed Murre:** Seen daily, but only very few in the south-eastern pack-ice.

**Black Guillemot:** Seen daily. First juvenile seen on August 2.

**Little Auk/Dovekie:** Seen in small numbers more or less daily, apart from in the south-eastern pack-ice.

**Atlantic Puffin:** A few seen on most days spent in the N and W. The furthest north were 3 birds on July 28 at 81°03’ N.

**Snow Bunting:** A few at most of the N and W side of Spitsbergen sites.
Mammals

**Blue Whale:** A total of 12 recorded. 1 at the north end of Hinlopenstretet on July 31 (seen only by crew in the night), then no less than 11 recorded (there could well have been more, we searched only a small area) on August 9 at the western edge of Hinlopenrenna. Of these, at least 4 seemed to be 2 female-calf “pairs”. 5 of the whales allowed a close approach by the vessel, even appearing on the bow, and 1 rolled over once on its side next to the ship.

**Fin Whale:** 1 seen briefly in Hinlopenstretet August 9, later that same evening 1 seen in association with one of the Blue Whale female-calf pairs (see above).

**Minke Whale:** 1 off the W coast of Spitsbergen July 25. 1 seen well in Hinlopenstretet August 9, later that same evening 2 seen in the same general area as the Blue and Fin Whales (see above).

**Narwhal:** Not seen alive, but 2 dead Narwhal were found in the pack-ice! On July 28, with the help of 6 Polar Bears, we found the remains of an adult-female NE of Sjuøyane, at 80°03’ N. Based on the amount of carcass remaining and how it was devoured over 2 days, we estimated that the feast had only begun 1-2 days earlier. Then incredibly, on August 2, a few miles to the north of Kong Karl’s Land, we came across the partial remains of an adult male Narwhal (9, later 16 Polar Bears present). Again, the evolution of the scene and the devolution of the carcass over 4 days made us conclude that the devouring had begun 1-2 days before our arrival. Once the bears had all left on August 5, we collected the 2-meter tusk attached still to the 0.5-meter skull (delivered to Svalbard Museum).

**Sperm Whale:** Not seen alive, but 2 carcasses of adult males were observed. We visited one at Danskøya on August 10 (with not much remaining and 1 bear present, but according to rumour having had up to 4 bears on it at a time for more than one month). The other was seemingly more intact and was found by us on August 12 at Tordenskjoldbukta (1 male bear present) (Later Morten learned that this whale was seen already in late summer 2016).

**Walrus:** 7 sightings of a total of ca. 550 animals. Males were hauled out at 4 sites, the largest concentration 250-300 beasts at Torellineset July 31. Females with calves were seen twice in the pack-ice, with about 20 near Sjuøyane on July 30 and about 35 ditto near Kvitøya on August 5.

**Ringed Seal:** A total of about 90 recorded. Some entire days were spent in good pack-ice, both in the N and the SE, without any records, while in other areas there were many more. 27 was the highest number recorded in one day, August 1.

**Harbour (Common) Seal:** At Virgohamna, on 2 visits, there were respectively 7 and 9 individuals. On August 10, there was one tiny juvenile present. Also 4 seen on the same day at the south end of the island.

**Harp Seal:** No large flocks registered, only a couple of small groups seen in the pack-ice, both N and SE. Recorded on 5 days with a total just over 100.

**Bearded Seal:** 46+ seen total on 8 days, of which 7 days in the pack-ice, both N and E.

**Polar Bear:** 52 total! The details of when, where and how are in the summary and the main text above.

**Arctic Fox:** Was to become the unexpected near-miss of the voyage. Despite 4 visits to known den-sites, only 1 fox was distantly seen on August 11, and 1 was heard at Colesbukta August 12. The known dens were seemingly already abandoned and all individual foxes roaming far and wide.

**Svalbard Reindeer:** Seen at 3 locations on the west side of Spitsbergen, with the highest number being 54 counted at Alkhornet on August 11.