



After a few Saudi summers what can you do to escape the heat and enjoy a different type of holiday? Travel to 80 degrees north and enjoy the cool of the Arctic!

Having spent more summers in Riyadh than we care to remember and looking forward to a holiday a little bit unusual we decided to travel even further north than usual and cruise in the Arctic, around Svalbard to be precise. Svalbard straddles the 80<sup>th</sup> parallel and is the focal point for many Arctic adventures. It offers hiking, snowmobiling, a jump off point for cruising, mountain climbing and is home to around 5,000 polar bears (Isbjorn). These white cuddly balls of fur can weigh more than 1,000 kilos and can outrun any expat!

The human history of Svalbard is one of exploitation, of the wildlife and the mineral deposits. Originally called Spitsbergen (Pointed Peaks) by the Dutch, this name is now used for the main island in the archipelago. Since the eighteenth century a number of countries were represented in various mining and whaling operations, for example, Great Britain, Russia, Holland, Norway. Under "The Treaty concerning the Archipelago of Spitsbergen" signed in 1925, by 52 countries, Norway was given sovereignty but it is not integrated within the Norwegian local government system and nationals of the signatory nations to the agreement have the right to live and work there. The main town is Longyearbyen, named after the American industrialist John Longyear and it houses the airport which welcomes you at the start of your adventure.



The town is busy during the brief Arctic summer and as can be imagined is somewhat quieter during the permanently dark winter months. From Port Longyear you join your "Expedition Ship".

## Arctic Adventure

Expedition cruises vary from the usual by virtue of their flexible nature and the fact that you depart the ship by zodiac inflatable dinghies. Whilst this is a dawdle during calm seas it can be a bit more interesting with an Arctic swell! The zodiacs allow the travellers to be deposited on remote beaches and also allow for close inspection from the water of ice, glaciers and sea birds. My first sight of a flock of guillemots swimming under our zodiac was a sight that I shall never forget. I did realise that seabirds fished but thought that they dived, caught their prey, and then surfaced; I did not know they actually swam.

The flexibility comes on the trip timings, as during the Arctic summer there is 24hr daylight and normal rules do not apply. Trips are thus timed to suit the appearance of wildlife. We have departed for a zodiac trip at 5.00 a.m. to return to the ship for breakfast and on another occasion we departed after dinner at 9.30 p.m. to see a mother polar bear and her cub. Our fellow travellers were a mixed bunch and as expedition ships tend to be rather small you do get a chance to build up friendships quite quickly. These trips offer different adventures to different types; I personally enjoyed watching the seabirds, although I had never previously shown any "twitching" inclinations. My wife, Trish loved seeing the polar bears on the ice, she will never forget those

