



images, especially a polar bear stalking a seal, who popped into the safety of an ice hole when the bear made his charge! Other people enjoyed seeing the walrus at their haul out, seals on the ice and Arctic foxes. There are a lot of sea birds, millions in fact. During our trips we have seen puffins, guillemots, razorbills, gannets, little auks, fulmars, arctic terns, sea eagles, arctic skuas, glaucous gulls, kittiwakes and buntings. We have seen whales, especially cruising south to a trip to Bear Island (which is not actually home to any polar bears). Thus far we have seen humpback, blue, minke, fin and beluga whales and it is truly humbling to see these majestic creatures. The wild flowers are also interesting to some and indeed it is remarkable that these small colourful plants survive in such a harsh environment. Personally I cannot get enthused about the geology, I did attend the lectures held on board but cannot really muster much interest, although for one Australian lady it was the reason she had travelled on the cruise.

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There are no age barriers on these cruises except that for a minimum age for children on the zodiacs. For the more active passengers there are hikes, glacier crossings and some gentle strolls. Any landing must be preceded by the landing of armed guides whose job it is to ensure that there are no polar bear incidents. At the opening briefing on respecting the rules of Arctic cruising you are informed of the protection afforded to the polar bears, the statement which sticks in my mind is, “there is less paperwork if we shoot a guest

than a polar bear”. After the guards are in position then passengers are deposited on the beach either to take part in a guided tour or roam on their own, within the perimeter that is protected by the guards. Only once have I been part of a quick departure from a beach, where a guard noticed that a large cream rock, had turned around and shown his black nose. The bear decided not to interrupt his slumber but we were politely requested to make our way back to the zodiacs, “as quickly as possible.”

A number of ships offer expedition cruising from sail boats with a few passengers to ships capable of taking over 100 passengers. Similarly it is possible to cruise on a budget or to opt for luxury travel.

We travelled on the Prince Albert 2, named after the environmentally conscious Prince of Monaco (www.foundationprincealbertidemonaco.net). This ship can accommodate 132 passengers and has an ice rated hull (www.silversea.com). Whichever type you choose you are certain to get close to wildlife and some truly spectacular scenery, and of course, at least for the time being, some ice!

Whilst this type of holiday is not for everyone, for my wife and myself, as long as we are able, it is our preferred choice. Other passengers have said that the Antarctic must be next on our list, but that would require a winter trip to catch the Antarctic summer. We have been fortunate enough to cruise around Svalbard and Bear Island in 2008 and 2009, and have hopes to make it again in 2010, Inshallah.

Words & Pictures from Bill & Trish Nicholson

