



OCEANWIDE  
EXPEDITIONS

# *South Spitsbergen*

29 September - 6 October 2009

on board

## *S/V Noorderlicht*



The *Noorderlicht* was originally built in 1910, in Flensburg. For most of her life she served as a light vessel on the Baltic. Then, in 1991 the present owners purchased the ship and re-rigged and re-fitted her thoroughly, according to the rules of 'Register Holland'. *Noorderlicht* is 46 metres long and 6.5 metres breadth, a well-balanced, two-masted schooner rig that is able to sail all seas.

**With:**

<b>Captain:</b>	<b>Gert Ritzema (Netherlands)</b>
<b>First mate:</b>	<b>Dickie Koolwijk (Netherlands)</b>
<b>Second mate:</b>	<b>David Biersteker (Netherlands)</b>
<b>Chef:</b>	<b>Anna Kors (Netherlands)</b>
<b>Expedition leader:</b>	<b>Rolf Stange (Germany)</b>
<b>Guide:</b>	<b>Daan Vreugdenhil (Netherlands)</b>

### **And 19 brave polar explorers**

from Australia, Belgium, Germany, The Netherlands, Poland, Russia, The United Kingdom and the USA

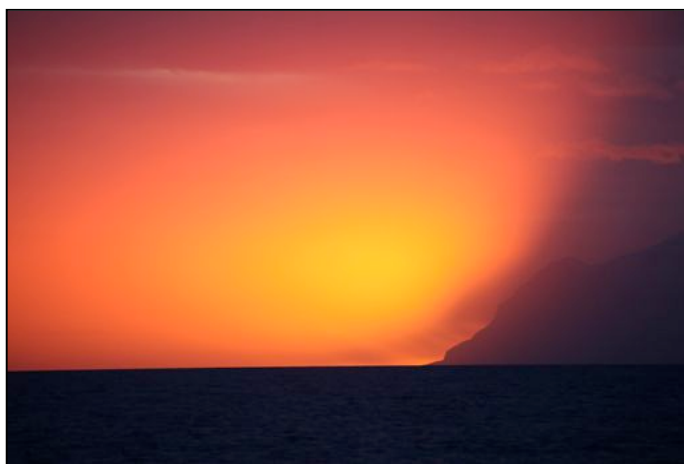
### **September 29<sup>th</sup> 2009 Longyearbyen**

GPS Noon Position: 78°13'N and 15°25'E. Air temperature: +2°C.

Sunrise at the above position: 07.10, sunset 18.41, sun above horizon: 11 hours 31 min

All of us flying in from Oslo saw a change in season. The very first trees in Oslo were starting to shed their leaves. On our way towards Tromsø the first snow was topping the mountains and soon all trees lost their leaves or were colored in a whole range of autumn colors. Arriving at Longyearbyen, the snow had fallen all the way to sealevel, and winter had kicked in. Longyearbyen is one of the World's most northernmost settlements, with only 2000 inhabitants. We were met at the airport by Daan, and taken to the *Noorderlicht*, the beautiful two-mast sailing ship that was going to be our home for the next seven days. We brought the luggage to the ship and proceeded to town where we had a little stroll around. This gave everybody a chance to see the town centre and the excellent museum in the large university building. On display in the museum is both the history of the archipelago and plenty of information about wildlife and other natural history.

Back on the ship we met Rolf, the expedition leader of our trip. The ship and the crew were introduced by Gert, the Dutch captain who owns half the ship (we did not find out which half it actually was). Dick and David, first mate and second mate, formed the crew together with our excellent chef Anna. After this welcome and staff introduction in the bar, we went through the obligatory lifeboat drill. The wind was in our favour so time to put up the sails for the very first time. Everybody was helping to get the sails up which is hard labour when you are not used to pulling ropes. What a magnificent sight it was to see the *Noorderlicht* with her sails up moving in westward direction into the most beautiful arctic sunset that you could imagine! We had a nice dinner although some people felt a little weird in their stomach, as the ship was noticeably moving to one side. The rest of the evening we got to know each other, had a nice chat and hit the sack early.



*Magical evening light in Isfjord.*

## September 30<sup>th</sup> 2009 Isfjord: Ymerbukta, Russekeila – Kapp Linné

Position at 0800: 78°16' N /13°57' E. Overcast, but also bright sunlight. ca. 2°C

Sunrise at the above position: 07.23, sunset 18.25, sun above horizon: 11 hours 02 min

We awoke to the appealing smell of a *Noorderlicht*-style breakfast. Once we had finished this, we went out to start the day's adventures. The anchor went up, and Gert sailed the *Noorderlicht* closer to Esmarkbreen, the large glacier debouching into Ymerbukta. It was an eery scene, with dark, jagged mountains towering to either side of the glacier, which had several large caves created by subglacial meltwater channels.

After this little cruise, it was time for our first landing! We went ashore on the east side of the bay, near the moraine ridges that the glacier had created not too long ago before it had retreated to its present position. Purple sandpipers searched the shoreline for food, and arctic terns and harbour seals were catching food in front of the glacier. Several bearded seals were hauling out on ice flows, enjoying the 'warm' autumn sun.



*Impressions from Ymerbukta and Esmarkbreen.*



We followed the beach to the glacier, where we found a small bay, hidden behind the moraine ridges and the calving front, and almost completely filled with small pieces of glacier ice. The view was indeed stunning! We even dared to walk a few metres onto the glacier – a "dead" part of Esmarkbreen that did not have any crevasses, where we enjoyed the scenery and the sunlight.

Once we were all back on board, we sailed to the other side of Isfjord to a nice place called Kapp Linné. We were dropped at Russekeila, near the mouth of Linnéelva (-river), where we found remains of an old settlement where the Russian pomors once lived in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Their way of living was quite different from modern life as it meant living year round in old dark moisty houses, eating mostly fish and meat.

On our walk we found some remains of fox traps and Daan told us how they worked. Rolf explained us about old whale bones and that they can lie on the tundra for several thousand years. The cold environment prevents the bacteria from breaking down the bone tissue.

We walked towards an old radio station called Radio Isfjord, situated at Kapp Linné, that was used to send all the signals from Longyearbyen and Ny Ålesund to the mainland. This function had been moved to a glass fibre cable that nowadays connects Longyearbyen and Norway; the houses of Isfjord Radio remain as part of the history and are used as a little hotel during spring and summer. Just before we got picked up by Dicky, the light of the sunset cast a whole palette of colors on the huge antenna's of Isfjord Radio.

Back on the boat, we started to make our way down to Bellsund, the large fjord south of Isfjord. Although a gentle movement of the ship could be observed, hardly anybody was seasick and we all enjoyed another recipe of Anna's hand. At around 00.30 we dropped anchor in Recherchefjord, our destination for tomorrow.



*SV Noorderlicht was in good hands, while we were exploring remains of Pomors (17th century Russian hunters) and the radio station Isfjord Radio / Kapp Linné.*

### **1 October 2009 – Recherchefjord: Recherchebreen, Jarnfjellet, Lægerneset**

Position at 0800: 77°30'N / 14°35'E. Calm, partly cloudy, sun breaking through. 3°C.

Sunrise at the above position: 07.26, sunset 18.17, sun above horizon: 10 hours 51 min

We had enjoyed a calm night at anchor and were delighted to see a beautiful day approaching before breakfast. The scenery was indeed stunning, with magnificent mountains and a number of smaller and medium-sized glaciers, in the most beautiful morning light of an arctic early winter day.

After breakfast, we repositioned a short distance to the innermost part of the fjord, where we wanted to visit the glacial lagoon near Recherchebreen (-bre(en) = (the) -glacier). Before we went ashore, we prepared some packed lunch so we could spend the whole day out, not having to return for lunch.

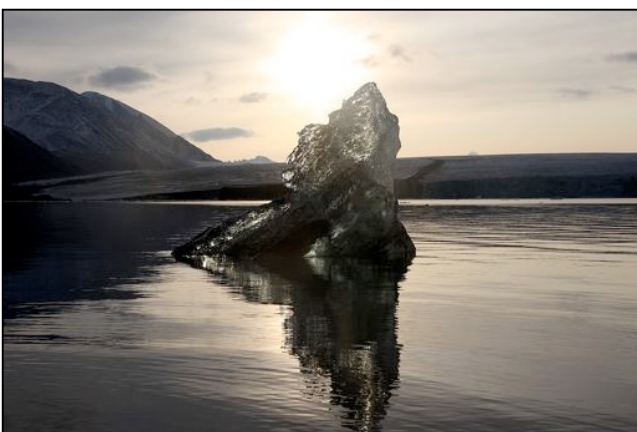
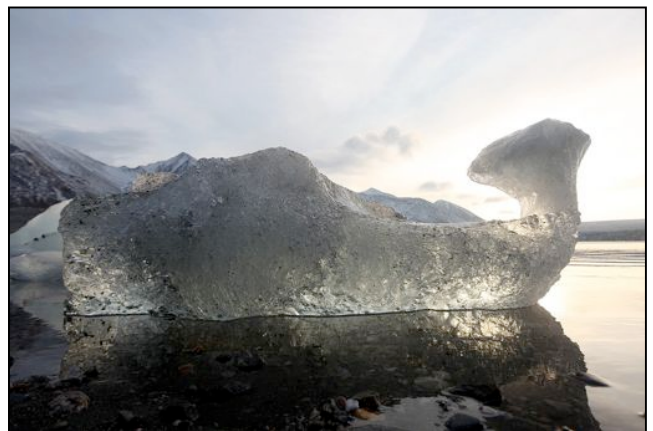
Soon, we stood on the shore near Recherchebreen. Some Purple sandpipers were busy searching the shoreline for food, and a group of kittiwakes were resting on some iceshelves in the lagoon. While we were walking towards the glacier the sun showed herself from behind the mountain and shone on the ice stranded on the beach leaving an magical reflection. Thousands of small bergy bits and growlers, as the old whalers would have called those small pieces of glacier ice, were stranded on the beach. A wonderful sight! All kinds of shapes, sizes, colours...We spent quite some time following the beach, always finding new perspectives and amazing new shapes, observing the playful interaction of the sun that still tried to break through the clouds, and some clear pieces of ice.

It did not take long until we discovered Polar bear droppings. Daan told us the dropping consists of all sort of material. Apart from meat the bears also eat vegetation to fill their stomach so they get rid of the feeling that they are hungry. The dropping made us realize these guys really existed, and they were around in this very area!

We left the lagoon and followed the shore northwards. After a while we found an old hut of the *Northern Exploration Company*. The old house was in bad condition due to solifluction (downslope movement of the soil above the permafrost layer). We had lunch while Rolf told us the story about this English company. In 1918-19, they had tried to extract iron ore from the mountain behind it, describing it as a "mountain of iron". But it consisted of rocks, just as it is today, and the enterprise turned out to be a failure.

After our nice little picknick we continued to the place where reindeer had been spotted on a large plain. Walking was easy because all rivers, streams and tundra were frozen solid. The reindeer were relatively easy to approach so we all had a good look at these guys, but would not let us come too close either. The velvet hang from the antlers indicating that the winter is coming. During the summer both male and female use the velvet, the layer over the antlers to get rid of the heat. Now it is cold enough and they shed the velvet. In about a months time they will also shed there antlers to be regrown from February on.

The trip ended at a place called Lægerneset, which holds remains of an English whaling station from the 17th century. We were picked up by the *Noorderlicht* again that was sailing to this side of the fjord to pick us up.



*Icy impressions and remains from a mining adventure in Recherchefjord.*



From the ship we saw our first bear. Unfortunately it was a very lazy bear, sleeping just behind a ridge. Sometimes it was visible, sometimes not but very far off. Some people had a look at the little „2 pixel bear“, others could not even find it with the binoculars.

During the evening, a northern light watch was set up to make sure we did not miss out on any adventure during the night. Despite all the effort, no northern light was seen.

## **2 October 2009 Bellsund: Ahlstrandhalvøya, Midterhukhamna**

Position at 0800: 77°34'N /15°E. Calm, partly sunny. 0°C.

Sunrise at the above position: 07.31, sunset 18.07, sun above horizon: 10 hours 36 min

Amazingly, we again woke on a beautiful day in the Arctic. The sky was clear and after another nice breakfast, we departed by Zodiac to a place called Ahlstrandhalvøya on the southern side of Van Keulenfjord. At the beach there were some boats left from beluga hunting in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The hunters used to bring nets between some small islands so the beluga could easily be dragged in.

During the walk the sun came out and enlightened the fjord with her sunspells. We all enjoyed the reflections of the mountains with powdersnow on the mountains. We took the opportunity to shoot a group photo in the sun. The surrounding was rather strange because the lines of the mountains who are normally horizontal were vertical. Rolf explained that very early in history Greenland and Spitsbergen separated, a process that involved some compressive movements that crumbled these mountains into a harmonica. Daan showed us a skull of a fox and a bear and explained the difference of their teeth compared to a reindeer who is a herbivore. The bear and fox both being carnivore have sharp teeth to kill, tear the flesh and swallow big chunks.

Down at the beach we found large piles of bones that remained after the intensive beluga hunting by the Norwegians. Hundreds of bones and skulls were silent remains of the slaughtering that had been going on.



*Van Keulenfjord.*

To prevent scurvy we went back to the boat to enjoy one of Anna's delicious cheese rolls. Gert our Captain replaced the ship while we were getting a little tired, coming from the cold into the warm, and with a full stomach our minds drift away.

Rolf woke us up for the second nice stroll of the day, at Midterhukhamna. We visited some old remains of an 17<sup>th</sup> century whaling station. The foundations were made with red bricks meaning that this site was English. When bricks are found to be yellow it is made by Dutchman. Behind the remains was an old trappers hut from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. One of the oldest and best preserved huts from Spitsbergen. It was a very tiny hut. Too small to live comfortably during a whole winter but good enough to spend a couple of days in and check your traps this way.

Rolf decided to split the group in two; Rolf was taking the group up to a ridge enjoying the views over the Van Mijenfjord and the Van Keulenfjord at the same time. While looking in the water we spotted a beluga whale! Far away but clearly visible. The other group joined Daan on a more easy walk enjoying the splendid



*Midterhukhamna: Old trapper hut and fine views over Bellsund and its side branches.*

views over the fjord and the magical light on the moss. We found a lot of foxtracks in the snow but unfortunately the owner of the prints did not show up. At the view on the fjord we also saw the same beluga whale swimming. Strange to see only one animal swimming because they normally travel in groups.

Back on the ship we all had to tell each other a lot on the things we had seen. After a nice dinner there was a little competition going on who was going to be on watch when. This resulted in a lottery of dividing of the shifts. It was a clear night so we did want to see the northern lights. Some determination might be successful in the end! Unfortunately, also this night our efforts were not rewarded.

### **3 October 2009 Fridtjovbreen, Vårsolbukta**

Position at 0800: 77°46'N /14°36'E. Calm, partly cloudy, sun breaking through. -1°C.

Sunrise at the above position: 07.40, sunset 18.01, sun above horizon: 10 hours 21 min



*Enjoying Fridtjovbreen and fine morning light over Van Mijenfjord.*

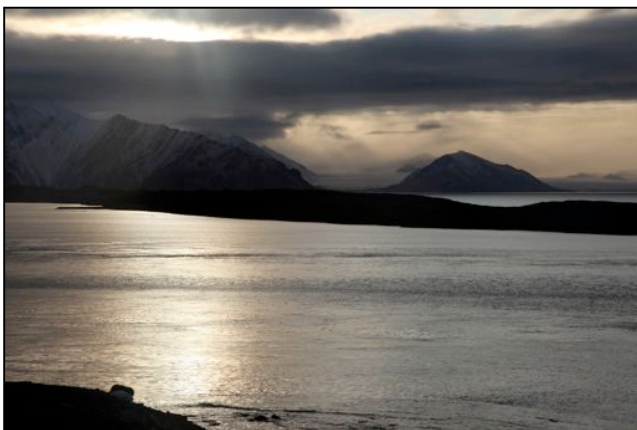
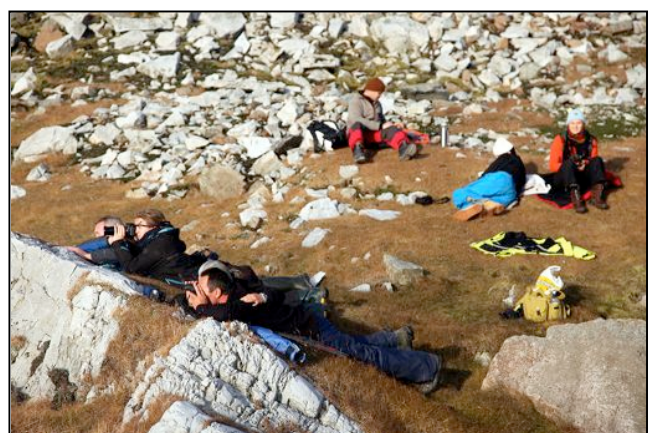


We woke up with the sight of yet another beautiful day. The sun revealed herself from behind the clouds. After breakfast we had a shipscruise along the Fridtjovbreen=glacier. A lot of birds were flying in front of the glacier and we saw a massive piece falling into the water, creating a huge wave!

After the little cruise we were dropped off at the shore where the parties were divided in two. The arctic strollers went with Daan to investigate the glacier. The second group went with Rolf on a hike towards Ingeborgfjellet and Vårsolbukta.

Daan and his little group went off for the glacier walk. We had to cross the moraine which was a bit hard at times. We walked in riverbeds without water but ice, we did a bit of boulderhopping and collected some very cold fresh glacier water. The best part of the trip was our little outpost on the glacier, from where we could see the rest of the glacier exposed in the bright sunlight. After a nice little photoshoot we returned to the ship where we had lunch while the ship was being relocated to Ingeborgfjellet, where the leisurely group went on shore again, now only containing two person. We came accross two reindeer next to an old goldmining hut. They slowly walked away from us while the rest of our group just showed up from the other side of the houses leaving a perfect photoshoot of close ups from the Spitsbergen reindeer.

Meanwhile, the others had enjoyed a very nice hike, following the coast westwards from Fridtjovhamna. There terrain was sometimes rocky, but mostly covered with lush tundra and thick moss beds, indicating huge breeding colonies of seabirds that crowded the near-by slopes during summer. One or two steeper slopes challenged our climbing abilities, but turned out to be a piece of cake for experienced arctic explorers



Noorderlicht in Fridtjovhamna and impressions from a hike in Bellsund: peaceful inhabitants and happy visitors.  
Stunning light and scenery over Akseløya and old hut in Vårsolbukta.



that we were by now.

A polar bear seen high up on a slope soon turned out to be a disguised fox. Finally, we continued further towards the old gold mining camp called „Camp Millar“ at Vårsolbukta, another failed *Northern Exploration Company* enterprise, where we were welcomed by some reindeer in an extremely friendly way.

Soon, we were all back on board.

Back on the ship, we started heading for Isfjord. Travelling back north we encountered some swell. At first most people enjoyed the *Noorderlicht* playing with the waves but the deeper she dived in the more people disappeared leaving only David on the wheel to steer us to more friendly waters.

#### 4 October Barentsburg, Borebukta

Position at 0800: 78°08'N / 14°11'E. Overcast and windy, some fresh snow. -2°C.

Sunrise at the above position: 07.51, sunset 17.53, sun above horizon: 10 hours 02 min

We woke up the first day with a little snowcover on the boat and overcast conditions. We had a quick look outside to feel the cold and come back in again to enjoy the warm and delicious breakfast from Anna's hand. We found ourselves again in civilisation, at least in a wider sense: the Russian coal mining settlement Barentsburg. This was where we had planned our morning excursion: A strong contrast to the previous days that had brought nothing but pure wilderness.

The area of Barentsburg had been claimed by a Norwegian company in 1912, when Spitsbergen was still No Man's Land, but was sold to a Dutch company already in 1920, that passed the mine on to a Russian company in 1932. Finally, it became property of the Russian state-owned mining company Trust Arktikugol. Barentsburg had obviously seen better days in the past, during the years of the Soviet Union. A fire in the mine in early 2008 had put a preliminary end to all mining activities, which was not continued before the summer of 2009. There were currently no more than about 500 persons living in Barentsburg, including a number of families with children. The architecture was deeply rooted in socialist building tradition. For photographers, Barentsburg was currently much more attractive than for miners: Interesting photographic objects could be found everywhere, and the morning passed quickly as we went around with Rolf who told a number of stories about this rather weird place. We repaired to the hotel bar in the later morning to test Russian drinks and chocolates; something we needed after a walk through town which was rather cold with



*A day of strong contrasts: Barentsburg and Borebukta.*

an fiercely blowing wind. The museum and souvenir shop were another popular stop for those seeking shelter for the cold.

After a nice lunch we headed to the north side of Isfjord to a place called Borebukta. A strong headwind slowed us down, so we decided at the nearest protected place available in the western branch of this bay, to make a walk to Nansenbreen. Borebukta was called after *Boreas*, the cold, northerly wind in Greek mythology; obviously an appropriate name. None of the crew had been to this part of Borebukta before so it was a new experience for all of us. We landed at a little bay from where we walked over the moraine towards the glacier called Nansenbreen. Spectacular evening light from both sun and moon filled the bay and the glacier while we walked back.

### 5 Oktober Billefjord: Skansbukta

Position at 0800: 78°31'N /16°02'E. Overcast. -4°C.

Sunrise at the above position: 07.53, sunset 17.35, sun above horizon: 12 hours 29 min

Another night of shifts for looking out for northern lights had past and failed again. We were all rather late for breakfast but really enjoyed it nonetheless. We were anchored in a little bay on the eastern side of Billefjord called Skansbukta where we had a little walk along the mining remains left by the *Dalen Portland cement works*, an American-English enterprise trying to exploit Gypsium, both without any success. Later in the 1930's the Norwegians had another attempt but they also failed. There was even a flagpole, mine-entrance and an old transport boat. After that we ventured on a hike around Skansbukta, taking advantage of the fact that the river did not exist at this time of the year. Everybody who wanted to, could also directly return to the *Noorderlicht*.

The hikers went on a walk on where we had to cross a frozen river and seen some frozen waterfalls. We had a lot of fun skating on the frozen water and even seen stones trapped in the middle of the frozen water. At a sudden moment Daan screamed fox and there indeed was an Arctic fox. It was a blue morph which is extremely rare on Spitsbergen. It is said that only 2% of the population has got a blue coat, and they stay blue throughout the winter. Approaching the end of the journey we reached a grave of a woman who spend a winter with her husband. Unfortunately she died of some abdominal disease. Her husband grieved, dug a grave, buried her and never returned to Spitsbergen.

The last kilometer we enjoyed the beauty of the arctic tundra before David arrived by Zodiac to transport us back to the ship. Gert and Dicky reeved the sails so the *Noorderlicht* was on it's way towards us with full sail while we drove towards them by Zodiac leaving us nice impressions and pictures.



*Our last waltz in Skansbukta: history, scenery and Noorderlicht under sail.*

Back on the ship Rolf held a little farewell briefing in where everybody was thanked. Slowly but steady with all sails up we sailed towards Longyearbyen our final destination of the trip. In the late afternoon, many of us took the opportunity for a walk to Longyearbyen, before we enjoyed our last, good *Noorderlicht*-style dinner.

In the evening, it was time to pack, although rumour had it that some of us went on to explore Monday night life in the high arctic metropolis of Longyearbyen.



## 06 October 2009 – Longyearbyen

Position at 0800: 78°14'N /15°37'E. Overcast, strong westerly breeze, -3°C.

Sunrise at the above position: 08.01, sunset 17.31, sun above horizon: 09 hours 01 min

It was hard to say goodbye to the *Noorderlicht*, that had been our home during an exciting week, her crew and our fellow passengers when a bus was ready to take us to Longyearbyen at 0900. There, we had some hours to explore the various excitements including the museum and the cafe, before most of us boarded the airport bus at 1300. It was difficult to believe that within a few hours we should be back to the haze and dazzle of big city life in Oslo and soon elsewhere on earth. We all had a fantastic time and will endure the beauty and spectacular surroundings till the end of our days.

*Thank you very much  
for travelling with us!  
See you again,  
somewhere between the poles!*

Text: Daan. Layout and photos: Rolf

This triplog and the group photo can be downloaded from: [www.Spitzbergen.de](http://www.Spitzbergen.de)

For more information, please see  
[www.oceanwide-expeditions.com](http://www.oceanwide-expeditions.com)  
[www.noorderlicht.nu](http://www.noorderlicht.nu)





1. Ymerbukta
2. Russekeila – Kapp Linné
3. Recherchebreen – Løgerneset
4. Ahlstrandhalvøya
5. Midterhukhamna
6. Fridtjovhamna
7. Vårsolbukta
8. Barentsburg
9. Borebukta
10. Skansbukta

