



OCEANWIDE  
EXPEDITIONS

## *South Spitsbergen*

22-29 September 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>Ted Broeckhuijzen (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>Guide:</b>	<b>Rolf Stange (Germany)</b>

And 18 brave polar explorers from The Netherlands and The United Kingdom

## **22. September 2009 – Longyearbyen**

Position at 1700: 78°14'N /15°37'E. Sunny, very gentle breeze, 1°C.

Sunrise at the above position: 06.20, sunset 19.21, sun above horizon: 13 hours 01 min

We landed on the runway of the little airport near Longyearbyen and were met by our fearless leader, Rolf Stange from Germany. Soon we were on a bus on the way to the high arctic metropolis of Longyearbyen, where we still had some hours time to explore the settlement with its various excitements such as museum, supermarket and cafes and restaurants.

Around 1700, we boarded the *Noorderlicht* which was alongside in the harbour of Longyearbyen. She was a beautiful view with her red hull and her two masts that were proudly pointing towards the brilliantly blue sky. We moved into our cabins, stored our luggage away and then met the friendly crew for the first time. Captain Ted welcomed us and introduced the ship and her crew. First mate Dickie went on with some important safety information, and then second mate David, gave us some information about life on board. Finally, Rolf finished with some information about what was going to happen in the near future. We had a good look around – everything on board the *Noorderlicht* seemed to breathe a certain spirit of adventure and tradition, but was very purpose-serving at the same time.

Soon, the firealarm was sounded – neither the engine room nor our dinner were going up in flames and smoke, it was only an exercise. We moved out on deck with our lifejackets, where we met our first mate Dickie who gave us some more instructions and information about the ship.

Finally it was time to try what our chef Anna had prepared in her little gally. We realised soon that the mealtimes were really something to look forward to, three times every day. In the meantime, we sailed out into Isfjord. Our high-arctic adventure was about to begin!

We crossed the large Isfjord, heading towards Ymerbukta, enjoying a marvellous sunset behind the mountains on the fjord's northern side. Many of us stayed up quite long, enjoying the beautiful arctic evening and hoping for some northern lights. We were not (yet?) lucky enough to get those, but otherwise, it could hardly be more beautiful. Finally, we went to bed and enjoyed a good first night's sleep on board.

## **23 September 2009 – Isfjord: Ymerbukta**

Position at 0800: 78°16' N /13°57' E. Overcast, occasional raindrops, northeasterly breeze, ca.5°C

Sunrise at the above position: 06.33, sunset 19.20, sun above horizon: 12 hours 47 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 Ted 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.

Then, 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



*Scenery in Ymerbukta.*

position. Purple sandpipers searched the shoreline for food, and we soon found some fossils that Rolf identified as brachiopods dating into the Permian.



*Sailing to Bellsund.*

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 took a group photo before we finally went back to the landing site.

Once we were all back on board, the sails went up, and the fresh breeze blow us out into Isfjord and later to the open west coast. We had set course for Bellsund, south of Isfjord. The afternoon even brought some sunshine, and we quite enjoyed travelling silently under sail.

Towards the evening, the wind direction changed and we had to start the engine, to reach Bellsund, where we wanted to spend the next couple of days. Near 2300 hours, the anchor went down. A BBC documentary about – guess what – the Arctic and polar bears had rounded the evening off.

## **24 September 2009 – Recherche fjord: Recherchebreen, Jarnfjellet**

Position at 0800: 77°30'N /14°35'E. Calm, partly cloudy, sun breaking through. 5°C.

Sunrise at the above position: 06.39, sunset 19.08, sun above horizon: 12 hours 29 min

We had enjoyed a calm night at anchor and were delighted to see the sun breaking through the clouds when we woke up before breakfast. The scenery was indeed stunning, with beautiful mountains and a number of smaller and medium-sized glaciers, in the most beautiful morning light of an arctic autumn 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).

Soon, we stood on the shore under the mighty mountain Observatoriefjellet. Some Purple sandpipers were busy searching the shoreline for food, and a large group of female Long-tailed





*Wildlife and scenery in Rechercheffjord.*

ducks was soon spotted on the fjord. We investigated the remains of a dead reindeer and a fox (very much in the same conditions), had a good look at some goose droppings that, as Rolf explained, were a very important link in the terrestrial arctic food web, making organic matter of otherwise undigestible tundra vegetation available for other consumers such as the polar fox.

It did not take long until we discovered Polar bear footprints. Exciting – although they were certainly not today's – these guys really existed, and they were around in this very area!

We continued across a barren beach plain and soon got to the lagoon, that separated the glacier from the fjord. 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. After a while, we finished the walk at the natural channel that connected the lagoon and the fjord.

For our afternoon landing, we repositioned just another mile to the east side of Rechercheffjord, where we went ashore near an old house, that was obviously not in good condition anymore. But what really caused quite some excitement was the news that a Polar bear had been seen, just as the first of us got on to the beach! It was first mate Dickie's sharp eyes that had spotted the animal, that was sleeping on a rocky ridge just a mile (nautical) further north.

The distance was large enough so we could safely walk a few hundred metres inland, to reach an elevated ridge from which we could all see the bear. It was clearly a polar bear bum that was sticking out from that ridge! As it didn't move, we finally turned our attention away from the bear to observe some reindeer, and one of them was kind enough to come quite close.

Hiking northwards, as we had originally planned, was obviously not an option in this situation, so we went back on board, not without having a good look at the hut. Rolf told the story behind it: In 1918-19, the English *Northern Exploration Company* had tried to extract iron ore from the mountain behind it, described as a "mountain of iron". But it turned out to be of rock, just as it is today, and the enterprise turned out to be a failure.

As soon as we were all back on board, we sailed further north, hoping that we could get some better looks at that bear. And indeed, she (Rolf had concluded that our bear was most likely female) was lazing around on that ridge, occasionally sticking her head up and occasionally even walking around, so we could get reasonable views and photographs.

The bear had indeed decided to rest at Lægerneset, a place that we wanted to visit, as it had remains of an English whaling station from the 17th century. But as the place was occupied, we agreed it might be wiser to stay on board. We dropped anchor to have enough time to observe the bear. Despite of the weather becoming rather wet and grey, we spent quite some time, keeping a good eye on the bear, and a brave one even climbed up the mast to get the best possible perspective.

Finally, as our bear had retreated behind the ridge and did not show any signs whatsoever that she might move again in the more or less near future, we continued around the corner into Van Keulenfjord, where we dropped anchor for the night. Rolf invited us for a talk about Polar bears to answer all the questions that we had now, as far as possible at least; there was still more than enough to learn for science about these great animals.

## **25 September 2009 –Ahlstrandhalvøya, Akseløya**

Position at 0800: 77°34'N /15°E. Light easterly breeze, overcast and rainy, later sunny, 3°C.

Sunrise at the above position: 06.44, sunset 18.59, sun above horizon: 12 hours 15 min

It looked rather grey, wet and hardly attractive when we got up before breakfast, but soon the sun started to break through and it looked better with every minute. We went ashore in a perfectly sheltered natural harbour, on a narrow peninsula with several old boots. These were used for Beluga whaling in the early 20th century. We enjoyed some great views from a nearby hill, until we started to walk up a tundra slope, stretching southwards between some rocky ridges that consisted of rather spectacular outcrops of vertically dipping strata of hard Permian carbonates and cherts. Also the mountains on the other side of the fjord displayed some beautiful geology, that was elaborated on in some detail by Rolf (forgot it all? Read "Rocks and Ice", written by your present scribe). Some reindeer were grazing on the tundra. A walk along the beach took us finally to a hut called "Bamsebu" ("bear home"), where we found some more remains from the days of Beluga "fishing" in shape of several large piles of bones.



Reindeer at Ahlstrandhalvøya.





*Stunning scenery, fascinating geology and dramatic history in Van Keulenfjord.*

The anchor went up while we were enjoying lunch, which was followed by a very pleasant, sunny cruise around Midterhuken, the mountain that separated Van Keulenfjord from Van Mijenfjord. We sailed through a narrow channel south of Akseløya (Aksel island), before we anchored on the eastern side of this narrow, long and rather peculiar island, that blocks Van Mijenfjord almost completely. Soon we went ashore on a little beach behind some rocky reefs.

The island was highly interesting from a natural history point of view, as it consisted of Permian and Triassic sediment layers that had been tilted to a more or less vertical position, thus creating the long, narrow island. The eastern part (Triassic) that we crossed first, consisted of flat, low-lying tundra with a relatively rich vegetation cover, whereas the larger, western part was made up of harder Permian carbonate and flintstone, forming an elevated, rocky ridge that was almost devoid of vegetation.

We went for the Triassic first. Then, we ventured into even older parts of earth history, moving into Permian layers as we ascended the highest mountain of the islands, which brought us to an altitude of 600 decimetres above sea level – where were the oxygen masks? The landscape was amazing, with the layers forming elegant curves and bends to both directions and the island being framed by the magnificent mountains of Ingeborgfjellet to the north and Midterhukfjellet to the south, both containing incredibly beautiful folds of the late-Palaeozoic and early Mesozoic layers. We followed the ridge for a short while to the south, walking up and down rocky hills, until several houses on the southern end of Akseløya came into view. We were amazed to hear that one of these houses was actually inhabited by a Norwegian trapper who collects down from Common



*Hiking on and sailing near Akseløya.*

eider nests in the area. The place had a long tradition as a hunting territory, going as far back as 1898, when the very first Norwegian trappers of the modern period of hunting came up to the area.

We went back to the Triassic part of the island, the eastern shore in other words, where we were soon met by Dickie who came with the Zodiac to pick us up.

The day had been beautiful and rich in arctic experiences and was nicely rounded off as the sails went up. The easterly breeze had picked up, and soon the wind blew us with 4-5 knots along Akseløya and through Akselsundet on its northern end, as the sun cast a beautiful evening light over the whole scenery with the sails in the foreground – an stunning view indeed. After dinner, Rolf called us together for our daily briefing and recap, and then we were gently rocked and rolled to sleep as the good, old *Noorderlicht* followed the coast northwards. The winds remained good for sailing, and we made up to seven knots as we followed the infamous Nordenskiöld coast (the west coast between Isfjord and Bellsund) northwards. The engine was only turned on as we set an easterly course into Isfjord, in the middle of the night.

## **26 September 2009 – Barentsburg, Finneset /Grøndalen**

Position at 0800: 78°04'N /14°12'E. Strong easterly wind, cloudy. 4°C.

Sunrise at the above position: 06.54, sunset 18.55, sun above horizon: 12 hours 01 min

We found ourselves again in civilisation, at least in a wider sense: the Russian coal mining settlement Barentsburg was the first thing we saw as we looked out in the morning. This was where we had planned our last 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, including some not suitable for under-age visitors, but we all managed to board the *Noorderlicht* again before lunchtime. The museum and souvenir shop were another popular stop on the way back.



*Lenin kept an eye on us while we made the world a little bit better in Grønfjord.*

A strong easterly breeze suggested strongly not to leave the relatively well sheltered Grønfjord, so after lunch we repositioned a short distance further south, to a little peninsula called Finneset, which translates to "fine cape", referring to the good natural harbour conditions. Earlier visitors that took advantage of the well-sheltered natural harbour were Norwegian whalers who ran a whaling station there between 1905 and 1912. Some remains such as the wooden flensing plain, some foundations and a number of concrete constructions that we could not quite understand, were still to be seen.

From Finneset, we continued further south, deeper into the Grønfjord. Heaps of coal on one side, Spitsbergen with its nature, mountains and glaciers on the other side – the contrast could hardly have been stronger. Once we had reached the coast with its small cliff, we had a look at the lower Tertiary shallow marine sediments with some fillings of channel created by tidal currents. Young kittiwakes came to say hello as we followed Rolf's interpretation of the greyish layers.

The beach towards Grøndalen was covered with amazing amounts of driftwood and litter that had been carried up by the Gulf stream. We took the opportunity to free this arctic beach from a considerable volume of plastic rubbish, including a number of fishing nets potentially dangerous to wildlife, before we went back on board.

The wind had picked up even further, so we decided to spend the night alongside the pier of Barentsburg as the anchor had already started to drag across the bottom.

## **27 September 2009 – Isfjord, Trygghamna**

Position at 0800: 78°04'N /14°12'E. Strong northeasterly breeze, sun coming through. 3°C.

Sunrise at the above position: 07.01, sunset 18.47, sun above horizon: 11 hours 46 min

Despite of strong gusts howling through the rigging of the *Noorderlicht*, we had spent a calm night alongside at Barentsburg. We were pleased to see that the clouds had mostly given way to blue sky, and the sun cast some beautiful morning light over the scenery around us. Some of us had apparently explored Saturday night life of this arctic metropolis the night before and were a bit calm, as we moved away from the pier after breakfast.

The weather conditions did not favour another landing in inner Grønfjord, as strong onshore winds would create strong surf on those beaches, so we ventured on a crossing of Isfjord. Even from a distance, we could see white horses dancing on the waves and some of us described the experience that we were most likely about to receive soon as "character-building".

Some sails went up, and we went northwards, under the light of the arctic sun and through the breeze. Many of us quite enjoyed sailing under these conditions, whereas others were fully entitled to be of a different opinion (could a minor intoxication resulting from last evening's events have had influence here?) and some were even said to have sacrificed to King Neptune.



*A slightly lively crossing of the wide Isfjord was rewarded with some friendly reindeer at Trygghamna.*



Around noon, we entered Trygghamna, a bay that had got its original name ("safe harbour") for good reason. We were accordingly soon safely and calmly anchored and went ashore once we had finished lunch.

A walk along the beach took us to the remains of a blubber oven, that was built there by whalers in the early 17th century, and to foundations of a Pomor hunting station. We then passed a modern hut that belonged to the omnipresent Sysselmannen (governor), before we went up a moraine ridge, from where we enjoyed a splendid view over a lush tundra plain and the whole southern coast of Isfjord, from Kapp Linné over Barentsburg, Colesbukta, Grumantbyen, Longyearbyen and even further.

But what caught our attention was the view of no less than altogether 13 reindeer, that were peacefully grazing on the tundra. We could get within close range, for some brilliant observation and photography.

Meanwhile, we spotted not only one, but two arctic foxes, high up on the scree slopes under Alkhornet. We went a bit further up, but without getting closer to the foxes – anyway, we had seen them!

A short visit to the remains of an old trapper's hut from the 1920s rounded the excursion off, before we went back to the landing site, after a solid 4 hours walk.

Spirits were high in the evening, as we went on to organize shifts to make sure we would not potentially miss any northern lights. And it paid off in the end: the clouds left, and those of us not afraid of a long, cold night were rewarded with the view of a green Aurora borealis on the southwestern sky! Even some good photographic evidence could be secured.



*Aurora borealis* behind Alkhornet, seen just after midnight and photographed by Duncan Jennings.

## **28 September 2009 – Borebukta**

Position at 0800: 78°15'N / 13°51'E. Overcast, 2°C.

Sunrise at the above position: 07.09, sunset 18.41, sun above horizon: 11 hours 32 min

We had spent the night at anchor on the western side of Trygghamna, until we started to move around 0730 to sail to Borebukta, where we wanted to do the last landing. The anchor went down shortly after 1000, and not much later we found ourselves again on another dark, arctic beach, where many small pieces of glacier ice were stranded, reminding us of diamonds on black cushions.

A short walk took us to the glacier Borebreen, rightly named after *Boreas*, the cold, northerly wind in Greek mythology. It had a wide calving front, the eastern side of which was resting on the beach, so we could approach it without danger. A fascinating, rare opportunity to get so close to a glacier! It was even kind enough to calve at the right moment. The thunder and the subsequent wave were indeed impressive.

We also went up the lateral moraine to stand on top of the glacier – real, hard, translucent, old glacier ice – before we finally walked back to the landing site.



*Borebukta: Mornin light and scenery.*

When we were back on board, it was time for lunch and to set course for our final destination: Longyearbyen. After lunch, we met for some logistical information concerning the near future, and 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.

### **29 September 2009 – Longyearbyen**

Position at 0800: 78°14'N /15°37'E. Weather: arctic. Temperature: cold.

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 hazzle and dazzle of big city life in Oslo and soon elsewhere on earth, but most of us knew already now that this was possibly the first, but definitely not the last visit to the far north.

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

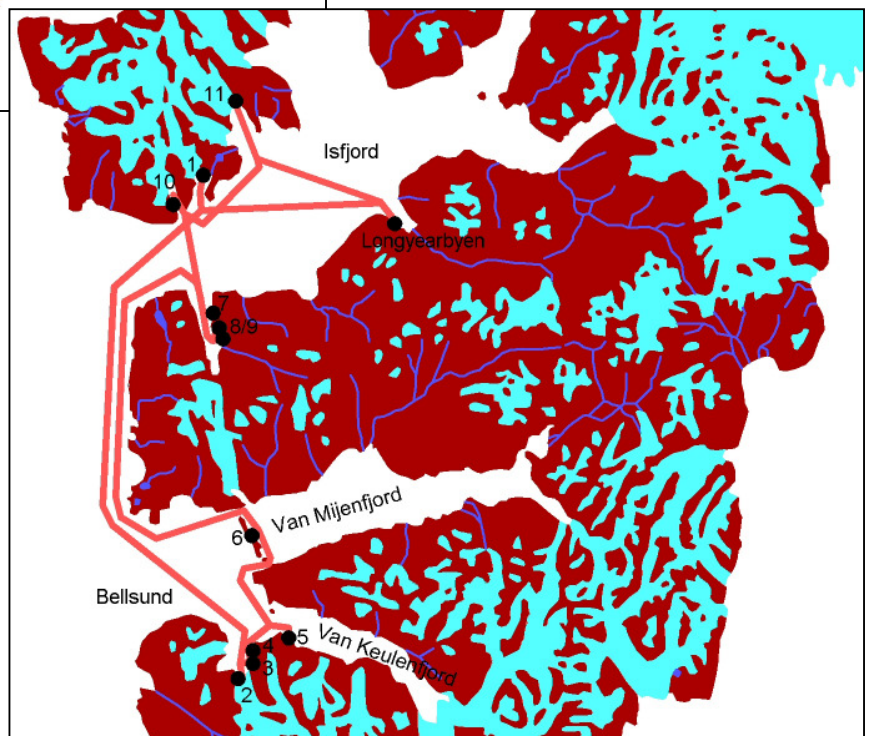
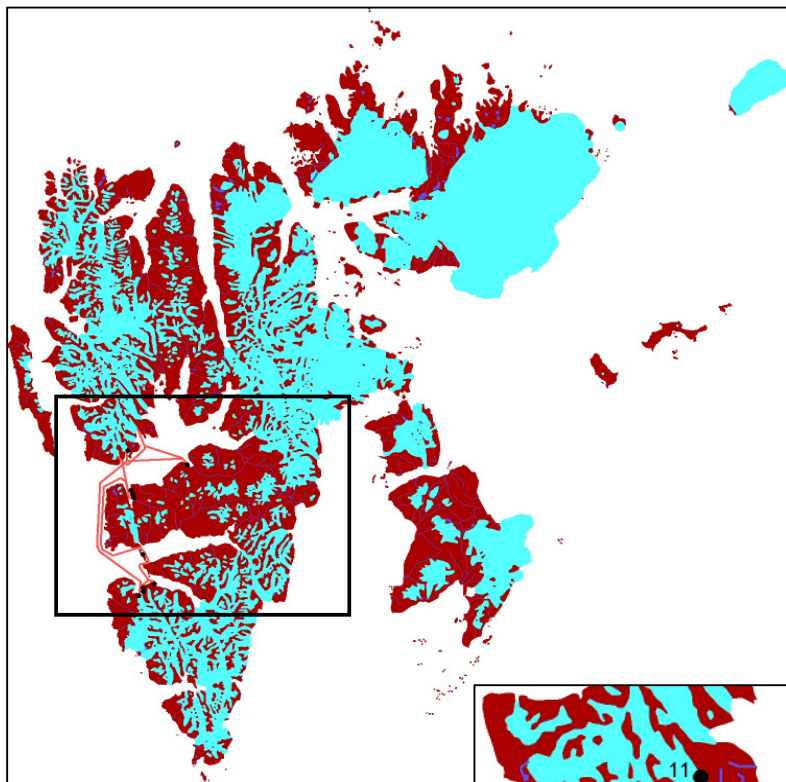
Rolf made this triplog.

**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. Recherchefjord: Recherchebreen
3. Recherchefjord: Iron Mountain Camp
4. Recherchefjord: Lægerneset (Polar bear)
5. Van Keulenfjord: Ahlstrandhalvøya
6. Van Mijenfjord: Akseløya
7. Grønfjord: Barentsburg
8. Grønfjord: Finneset
9. Grønfjord: Grøndalen
10. Trygghamna
11. Borebukta