



Spitsbergen

Triplog - October 17-24, 2011

SV 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:

Captain: Gert Ritzema (Netherlands)
First mate: Jeroen van Zal (Netherlands)
Second mate: Peter Dijkstra (Netherlands)
Chef: Sonja van Berkel (Netherlands)
Expedition leader: Rolf Stange (Germany)

And 18 brave polar explorers from Belarus, France, Germany, Russia and The Netherlands.

October 17 – Longyearbyen

GPS Noon Position: 78°13'N and 15°25'E. Air temperature: -3°C.

Longyearbyen is one of the World's most northernmost settlements, with only 2000 inhabitants. Most of us came with the scheduled flight today and where met at the airport by Rolf, our expedition leader and guide, before we went on the bus to town, where we still had a little bit of time to visit the museum or do some shopping before we went to the harbour to the *Noorderlicht*, the beautiful two-mast sailing ship that was going to be our home for the next seven days.

Once we had all moved into our cabins, we were officially welcomed, introduced to the crew and given some important safety instructions which we hoped we would never have to practice beyond the little drill that was soon to follow. Then it was time to start the engine and soon we sailed out into the large Isfjord. After a good 3 hours calm crossing, the anchor went down in Ymerbukta and we went for a good night's sleep – only interrupted by the occasional bell announcing northern lights, but it was more than worth getting up for it!



Starting our arctic adventure on the verge of the polar night.

October 18 – Isfjord: Ymerbukta, Alkhornet

Position at 0800: 78°16.6'N /14°02'E. Calm, clear; -6°C, 1006 hPa.

Sunrise at the above position: 09.43, sunset 15.55, sun above horizon: 06 hours 12 min

We awoke after a calm night at anchor and enjoyed a hearty breakfast, before getting down to business with a detailed in-



Our first landing near Esmarkbreen in Ymerbukta in amazing October light conditions.



Short walk to the glacier front of Esmarkbreen.

roduction into Zodiac operations, safety measures and environmental regulations before venturing on our first landing. The shore near Esmarkbreen (-glacier) on the east side of Ymerbukta turned out to be rather shallow at the prevailing low tide, but we managed well and soon we stood all ashore, in the middle of an exciting scenery that seemed almost otherworldly in the very low sun of a mid October morning – well, it was already 10 a.m., but the sun did not even manage to climb above the mountains on the far southern horizon.

We walked along an icy shoreline towards Esmarkbreen, which provided some stunning views in this light. The ice, normally blueish-grey, was mostly dark green. The surface of the active glacier was very broken by crevasses. Two seals were resting on fresh ice in a small bay, but disappeared soon into the water.

We enjoyed the fantastic view for a while and used the background for a group photo, before we walked back to the *Noorderlicht* to for another perspective on the glacier front, as we sailed towards it with the ship.

During lunch, we repositioned into the next bay further west, Trygghamna, to land on its western shore under the mountain Alkhornet. Already upon landing we were greeted by a small herd of reindeer, which disappeared soon behind a ridge, but then showed up again and approached us rather curiously.

We passed by the hut, which belonged to the Sysselmannen (governor, Norwegian administration of Spitsbergen). Any believe it might be there to save lives in cases of emergency was soon driven out when we found out that it was locked – one would rather freeze to death just outside! We left the building behind and continued over some moraine ridges towards the tundra plain that lay under Alkhornet. Several more small groups of reindeer were searching for eatable plants in the snow-covered tundra, but were obviously getting ready for the mating season, as they fought playfully.

We had a look at a trapper's hut that was built in 1920 by the legendary Norwegian hunter Hilmar Nøis and walked out to the point, from where we had a good overview over most of Isfjord before we returned to the landing beach. Back on board, we did not waste any time but hoisted the sails to make good use of the gentle easterly breeze, and soon we made a fine 6 knots towards the southwest, rounding Kapp Linné and following the west coast of Nordenskiöld Land (central Spitsbergen, south of Isfjord) towards Bellsund, our destination for tomorrow and the following days. After dinner, we discussed the days events such as glaciers and reindeer, before rounding the day off in the bar and occasionally watching out for polar lights.



Reindeer encounters at Alkhornet.



October light on the mountains east of Trygghamna and Hilmar Nøis' hut from 1920.

October 19 – Bellsund: Recherchefjord, Van Keulehamna

Position at 0800: 77°30'N / 14°35'E. Partly overcast, calm, -4°C, 1002 hPa.

Sunrise at the above position: 09.36, sunset 15.57, sun above horizon: 06 hours 21 min

Around midnight the anchor had gone down near the small island of Reinholmen in inner Recherchefjord. Clouds had moved in and obscured the sky, so no more northern lights were to be seen tonight.

Around 09.30, it was light enough to go ashore at the lagoon of Recherchebreen. A short walk across a snow-covered outwash plain took us to some small moraine hills next to the lagoon, which was by now completely frozen over. Small pieces of glacier ice were lying on the icy shore. On the other side of the lagoon, the Recherchebreen had its darkblue, partly almost black, calving cliff.

We followed the “shore” for a while to secure views of the icy scenery from different perspectives before returning back to the beach on the outer side to be picked up again for lunch.



At the glacial lagoon of Recherchebreen.

Meanwhile, the wind had picked up considerably, so a second landing in Recherchefjord, as we had originally planned, was not an option under given conditions, so we moved northeastwards into Van Keulenfjord. There, we found the wind blowing hard from the east, but as it turned out, Van Keulehamna on the northern side of Van Keulenfjord offered enough protection for a landing. At 2 p.m. (2 hours before sunset, in other words), we went ashore and for a walk on the peninsula called Forsbladodden. After crossing a coastal plain that consisted of post-glacial beachridges, we climbed up a little fossil coastal cliff marking the marine transgression connected to the holocene climate optimum about 6000-8000 years ago, before moving on to the steeper slope leading up to the rocky hill called Bravaishnatten, where we enjoyed splendid views of Recherchefjord and outer Van Keulenfjord from an altitude of 142 metres above sea level – of present day, that is; soon after the ice age, our hill would hardly have been any higher than 30-40 metres above the then shoreline.

It was near 4 p.m. or sunset time in other words, and it was indeed about to get a bit dark and gloomy, as the sky was now completely hidden behind a dark-grey cloud cover. We returned to the landing site and managed the little bit of surf on the beach without any difficulties.

The most recent weather forecast “promised” northeasterly winds during the evening, so it was the best to stay in Van Keulehamna during the night. A lecture on northern lights rounded the day off.



Van Keulehamna/Forsbladodden: Surf on the beach – lichens on stones.

Ptarmigan – view across Van Keulenfjord.

October 20 – Bellsund, Van Keulenfjord: Ahlstrandhalvøya, Midterhukhamna

Position at 0800: 77°37'N / 14°56'E. Overcast, northerly gusts, -1°C, 991 hPa.

Sunrise at the above position: 09.46, sunset 15.44, sun above horizon: 05 hours 58 min

Van Keulehamna indeed turned out to be a good natural harbour, so we had again a calm night. The wind in Van Keulenfjord had turned down enough to permit a landing on the southern side, so we sailed across the fjord and made for Ahlstrandhalvøya, where we landed in a little bay near an old boat. After a short walk we reached an old wooden house called Bamsebu (“Bear hut”), which was indeed well secured against polar bears. Nearby, we found piles of old Beluga bones bleached in 90 years of midnight sun and polar winters. In the early 1920s, Norwegian hunters had taken hundreds of these relatively small toothed whales here.

Following the beach, we then continued westwards towards a rocky hill, from which we had nice views over Van Keulenfjord including its amazing geological structures, before we went down to a lovely little bay called Fleur de Lyshamna. Some friendly reindeer watched us curiously, before they went their own ways, and so did we, continuing



Old whalebone near the hut „Bamsebu“ – whaling boats at Kapp Toscana.

towards to wooden huts, one of which was built by Russian geologists whereas the other one belonged to the omnipresent Sysselmannen.

On a narrow peninsula, we found three old wooden boats dating to the Beluga whaling days, before we went to the western side of the peninsula to be picked up again for a slightly delayed lunch.

As soon as we had put our spoons on the table – making most of the scarce daylight was the motto of the day – we went ashore again in Midterhukhamna, furthest west on the large peninsula that separated Van Keulenfjord from Van Mijenfjord (Nathorst Land). The outer point turned out to be a beautiful rocky coast with rocky columns and weird shapes, where a shy fox could easily run away and hide from us. The plan was to walk around the western point of Nathorst Land and be picked up again on the northern side, but when we had reached our viewpoint on some hills on the westernmost part, it became quite evident that a pickup on the northern shore was out of question in the strong northeasterly winds that blew through Van Mijenfjord. So we headed back to the same landing site to board the *Noorderlicht* again dry and safely.



Viewing from Midterhuken across Bellsund to Ingeborgfjellet and Akseløya.

Once we were all assembled in the bar, it was celebration-time, as Vitaliy had had birthday on Monday and Joke today – happy birthday!

In the evening, we got together in the *Noorderlicht* lecture venue (otherwise known as the lower half of the restaurant) to listen to Rolf's talk about Polar bears – fascinating beasts, now we just needed a bit of luck to see one of them the next days...

October 21 – Bellsund, Van Mijenfjord: Akseløya, Fridtjovhamna

Position at 0800: 77°38'N / 14°46'E. Calm, mostly clear sky, -0°C, 1001 hPa.

Sunrise at the above position: 09.56, sunset 15.34, sun above horizon: 05 hours 40 min

The anchor went up as soon as we had finished breakfast and we were perfectly in time at the southern end of Akseløya in Van Mijenfjord, when the light was just about to be bright enough. The sky was mostly clear and we had very nice light and weather conditions, as we went ashore in a small bay surrounded with steeply dipping rock layers. Looking south, we had the northern slope of Midterhukfjellet near us, which displayed some of the most beautiful geological fold patterns one could imagine.



Cairn on Akseløya with view across Bellsund and towards Ingeborgfjellet.



After a short walk we reached a cairn on a rocky hill with good views over Akseløya and Van Mijenfjord, with Midterhukfjellet in the south and, a bit more distant, Ingeborgjellet and Fridtjovhamna in the north. Further east, the large valley Reindalen opened towards and the inner reaches of Van Mijenfjord with the mining settlement of Sveagruva were hidden in clouds.

We made a loop to reach the small collection of huts at the southern end of this unusual island before returning to our landing site. Soon thereafter, we sailed through the narrow passage of Mariasundet and followed the eastern side of Akseløya northwards. Once the anchor had fallen in Fridtjovhamna, we went ashore on a narrow, dark beach under a



Sailing through Mariasundet – first views on Fridtjovbreen precisely from sea level.

moraine ridge on the eastern side of the bay. Despite of the time being no later than near 2 p.m., the last rays of the sun cast a dark orange evening light only over the highest peaks which were towering over the crevassed calving cliff of Fridtjovbreen. We went up the ridge and enjoyed brilliant views on the glacier with its crevasses and ice-cliffs and the surrounding scenery, before getting back on board for a short cruise near the glacier front.

Then it was time to set sail – literally, as we had favourable easterly winds, so we could leave Bellsund silently, old style, and start our return journey to Isfjord.



Stunning views, shapes and colours at Fridtjovbreen.



Hoisting sails and setting course for Isfjord. Right: Captain Gert and First mate Jeroen.

October 22 – Isfjord: Barentsburg

Position at 0800: 78°04'N / 14°10'E. Calm, mostly clear, -3°C, 1012 hPa.

Sunrise at the above position: 10.18, sunset 15.17, sun above horizon: 4 hours 59 min

We had arrived Barentsburg near midnight, and some exceptionally energetic individual still ventured for a little walk ashore – Barentsburg by night. Most of us preferred to wait until Rolf offered a general introduction into the historical and political background after breakfast, before we then started our little town walk in this unusual community. Rolf guided us around and told stories from the past, present of future of Barentsburg, and the visible impression of this Sovjet-style coal mining company town provided a strong contrast from all our other arctic experiences so far.

In the end, we all repaired to the bar in hotel, which was slightly reluctantly opened by the service lady – we were quite happy that we didn't have to rely on her for our further well-being, but could then move back to our good old *Noorderlicht* for lunch.

Following the southern coast, we headed deeper into Isfjord, Spitsbergen's largest fjord system. We passed the old Russian harbour in Colesbukta and the associated mining town of Grumantbyen, at the foot of some steep cliffs. Both of these two places had been abandoned in 1962. Later, Longyearbyen came into view on portside, but we would get there far too soon tomorrow and we continued into Billefjord, to the bay of Skansbukta to drop anchor there for the night. Meanwhile, Peter opened the world-famous *Noorderlicht*-souvenir shop for us, and at the same time, Rolf offered to sign his books.

A journey through 600 million years of Earth history of Spitsbergen, squeezed by Rolf into 42 minutes, was the last official event of the day.



Barentsburg: where two exotic worlds meet.

October 23 – Billefjord: Skansbukta, Sassenfjord: Gipshuksletta

Position at 0800: 78°31'N / 16°00'E. Overcast, no wind, gentle westerly swell, -1°C, 1017 hPa.

Sunrise at the above position: 10.30, sunset 14.49, sun above horizon: 04 hours 19 min

When we assembled for breakfast at 8 a.m., it was still night; with the sky being overcast, it did not look as if the sun had any plans to rise today. Hoping for the best, we boarded the Zodiac at 9.30 to go ashore on the near-by beach here in Skansbukta to inspect the remains of a gypsium mine from the early 20th century. The cliffs towering above the old



Icey-greyish landing at Skansbukta. The light had pretty much given way to the polar night.

relics made for a majestic background, although the light never rose to anything beyond twilight. We went out to the corner to have a look at some coastal outcrops of the gypsium layers and to enjoy the view over this meeting place of fjord, the Billefjord coming from the north, the Sassenfjord/Tempelfjord from the east and the large Isfjord opening up in the southwest.

Upon coming back, the old boat that had been used in the days of mining to ship gypsium out to larger ships at anchor in the bay turned out to be a popular object for photography. Once everybody was on board, we repositioned to Gipshuken for our last walk.

We embarked on the southern side of Gipshuksletta, southwest of Gipsdalen and on the corner between Billefjord and Sassenfjord, on a shallow, rocky shore near an old trapper station. The hut was built in the 1920s by Norwegian trappers and is not in regular use anymore. According to the tracks in the snow, the last living creature to have visited the hut had been a Polar bear.

A walk across a stony, snow-covered plain took us up to a low-lying rocky ridge with good views into almost all directions, including Billefjord with the famous Pyramidenfjellet in the distance, where also the Russian mining settlement was (abandoned in 1998).

On the northern side of Gipshuksletta, *Noorderlicht* was already in position to pick us up again. This had been our last landing; hard to believe that our arctic adventure had now come to an end!



Old trapper hut on Gipshuksletta – hoisting sails in Sassenfjord.

But we were not quite there yet. Volunteers were needed to hoist the sail, and soon we made no less than a very pleasant 8.5 knots on our way across Sassenfjord and towards Adventfjord, without a single turn of the engine!

Later during the afternoon, Rolf called us together for a quick overview of our logistics later today and tomorrow, and then we were asked to keep clear of the inside public areas for a while. What might be going on? The secret was soon revealed, as it was *Gerd's dinner* tonight, in good old *Noorderlicht* tradition, and this was to be something special indeed! Well, there was more than enough to celebrate. Our polar voyage had been a success – only a Polar bear beyond those in the museum or airport remained to be seen, but well, there had to be something left for next time...

October 24, 2011 – Longyearbyen

Position at 0800: 78°13'N/15°25'E. Overcast, light easterly breeze, 0°C, 993 hPa.

Sunrise at the above position: 10.35, sunset 14.48, sun above horizon: 04 hours 13 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. Most of us were pretty sure that this would not have been the last time to the far north.

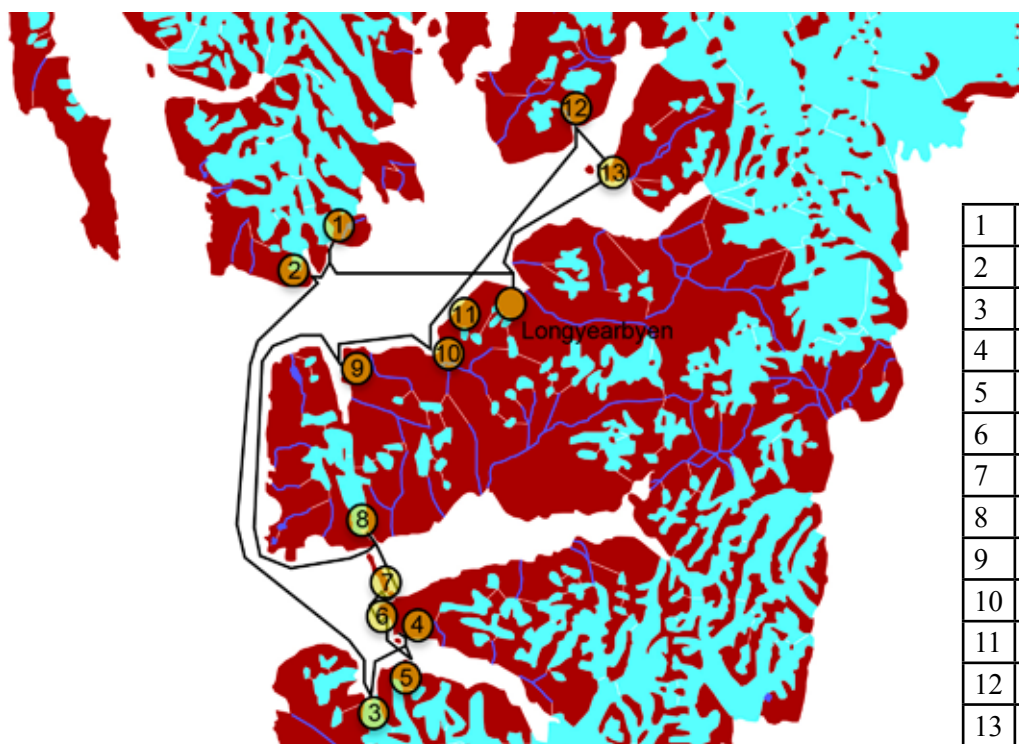
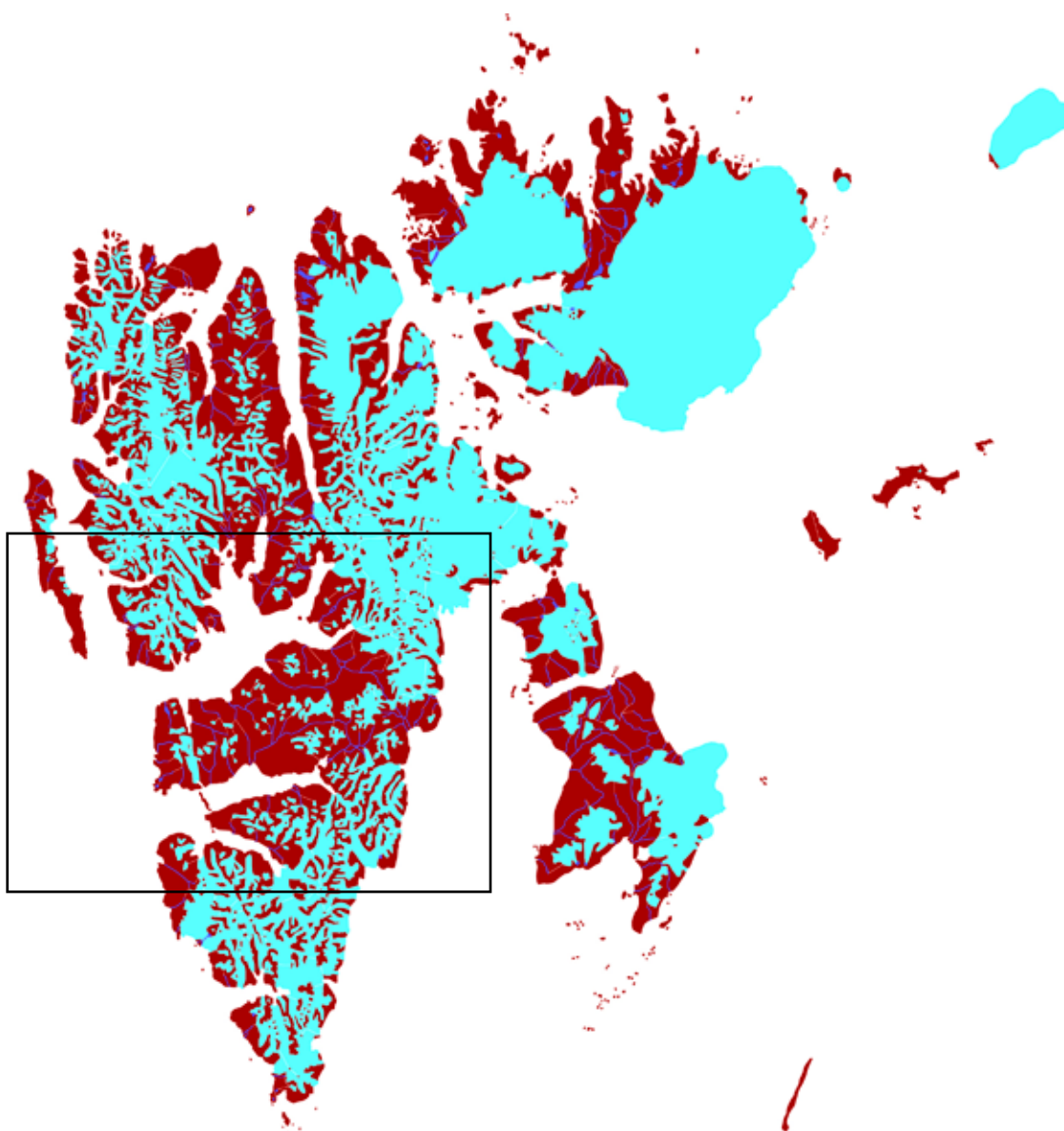
**Thank you very much for travelling with us!
See you again,
somewhere between the poles!**

This triplog has been written and layouted, complete with map and photos, by Rolf Stange.
It can be downloaded together with the group photo, from: www.Spitsbergen-Svalbard.net

For more information on polar voyages, please see www.oceanwide-expeditions.com and www.noorderlicht.nu

Lectures, presentations...	
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