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Wildlife

Cold snap in the Arctic

Can any idiot turn up on a photographic safari amid the brutal beauty of the Arctic and get great pictures of polar bears? Our man gives it a shot...

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Do not invite me to your house. Do not make eye contact with me in the street. Do not ask if I've been anywhere interesting lately. And do not, for pity's sake, express an interest in any pictures I may have taken recently.

For, like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner with a memory card, I now roam the earth compelled to show anyone and everyone the 5,544 photos I took on my trip to the Arctic. It's not as if I even like photography; normally I refuse to carry a camera on holiday at all (a touch of affectation, perhaps, since I don't actually own one). But I have dreamed of seeing polar bears in the wild ever since my first Fox's glacier mint, and I'd been told that the best chance of spotting the elusive beast was off the shores of Svalbard on a 'Photographic Special' boat charter. True, there's a whole fleet of floating gin-palaces that cruise the region, but, by and large, their opportunities for exploration are dictated by dinner sittings, the age/inclinations of their cosseted clientele, and the vessels' very size (too big for many of the bays). What I'd found instead was the Akademik Sergey Vavilov – a small but punchy ice-strengthened Russian research ship that gets taken over twice a year by adventure-holiday specialists Exodus and their photographic guru Paul Goldstein.

'It may be gruelling,' threatens Goldstein in the brochure, 'but we will maximise every one of those 24 daylight hours. And bears are right at the top of the agenda.' I booked my place, borrowed a nice Nikon – and found myself in the world's most boring town.

Longyearbyen is Svalbard's capital, its air entry point and the launchpad for its maritime adventures; but since Svalbard is an only-Ireland-sized archipelago of icy deserts and uninhabitable tundra just 900km from the North Pole, you shouldn't take 'capital' to suggest opera houses and skyscrapers. (Clearly it's all relative. 'There is a lot happening here now,' says my breakfast waiter proudly, gesturing around him at the town's cluster of grey rooftops. I follow his gaze and note that there are no people visible, and no object moving – that there is literally nothing happening.)

I didn't come here for the nightlife, though. Instead, I board the Vavilov and surrender myself to Paul. 'You're ours now for 10 days,' he says. 'Get used to it.' And I do. Conditions are a little cramped, food is functional rather than fancy, and there are indeed some piercingly-early wake-up calls – but the view from on deck is worth a QE2-ful of luxuries. A universe-sized sky stretches out across an answeringly-infinite expanse of water that's neon-blue in the sunshine, wraith-grey under cloud, and blue-black like the heart of a candle flame in the hours-long evenings. Meanwhile the land rears up like it's the stuff God knocked out while still an angst-ridden teenager – gothic-dark cliffs, sheer fury-faced crags, thundering heavy-metal mountains – and then there's the ice.

There are bergs as big as churches, and as sculptedly curvaceous as a '90s supermodel, but it's the (less dramatic) brash ice that somehow captures the imagination most: as hypnotically ever-changing as clouds, these pond-sized scurfs of white drift silently by, laid out like stepping stones to the horizon. Which is exactly what they are if you're a polar bear.

The largest predator on land, these not-always-cuddly 500kg giants patrol the perimeter of the Arctic's ice shelf hunting seals – while we patrol it hunting them. Spotting an all-white creature in an all-white landscape is tricky though (even a 500kg one), and initially most of our excited yelps turn out to be sightings of the more common 'Rock Bear' (similar in size and shape to its glamorous cousin, but sadly made of snow-dusted stone).

Meanwhile, we practise our camerawork on birds. There are some very serious amateur photographers on board (definition of serious? When your telephoto lens is longer than your forearm), and I try to learn what I can from them, but my head is soon a whirl of f/stops and exposure settings, and my shots are a mess of blur and bad lighting. Which is a shame, because the skies here are as busy as Heathrow's: pairs of thuggish skua birds harry and dive-bomb smaller birds until the victim vomits up its last meal for the skuas to eat; barnacle geese glide purposefully past, already thinking about their annual migration to western Scotland (only a creature of the High Arctic could consider Glasgow a nice balmy bit of winter sun).

And when we leave the ship in its fleet of Zodiacs (like motorised dinghies but beefier), we cruise beneath vast seabird cities ranged 100m high up improbable basalt cliffs and columns – half a million kittiwakes, guillemots and puffins scrapping for ledge space. Their combined guano fertilises the ground below, so there are welcome splashes of green among the greys and whites that make up Svalbard's palette – and pockets of liveable land for reindeer and arctic fox.

I'm still fiddling around trying to get my shutter speeds right when we're lucky enough to spot a crèche of tiny furry foxes leaping like lambs – so that's a picture engraved on my memory rather than my computer's. But it all clicks for me later that evening. After one of Paul's post-prandial lectures in the Vavilov's bar (always packed, his devotees hanging on his words of photographic wisdom like he's the leader of a cult), he takes me aside and lets me into a secret: a modern digital camera's automatic settings are actually pretty decent.

Suddenly I'm free just to rattle off pictures, scattergun-style, and the difference is instant. For every walrus I see, I'm now taking maybe 50 shots: 40-odd are a waste of disk space, half-a-dozen are half-decent, and maybe just one or two are actually good enough to show the folks back home. And my new-minted technique (or, to give it its technical name, 'luck') comes just in time: the ship's tannoy crackles into life, but Paul's voice is untypically hushed. Because he doesn't want to scare off the polar bears we're quietly homing in on.

It's a mother and cub, as perfectly pin-up-pretty as you could ask for: Dulux-white fur, eyes sad and soulful, cuddling up close together, and – in at least one of the several hundred frames I devour – staring straight down the lens as if they're in on the whole 'make me look like a proper photographer' scam. They're truly exquisite creatures, combining the raw predatory power of a top carnivore (the mother's knife-sized teeth and claws are unmistakably crimsoned) with an irrefutable awww-factor (they play, they embrace, they lick each other's faces).

These two turn out to be just the first of a dozen or so bears we see over the next few days – one so close he's actually touching the ship, another sledging 200m down a hillside on his tummy, and a third nearly bringing one of our landings to an abrupt end when she appears on the same islet as our party. In fact the walks were exciting enough without added adrenaline, particularly when they involved a walrus 'haul-out' – that's 20-odd sets of male tusks and flippers piled on top of each other, grunting and belching, like a rugby scrum that's collapsed under the weight of its own grossness.

On a more – or, arguably, less – edifying note, it's also on the landings that you get to wander among the skulls and skeletons of seals, whales, walrus and reindeer, slaughtered for their furs or oil. They're piled chillingly high in places, and will remain so: anything from before 1945 is officially designated 'cultural remains' and must be left in situ. ('Does that apply to us?' ask the sexagenarian couple next to me in the Zodiac.)

But the best thing about those walks is when the banter and bonhomie of the boat drops away. Although we are divided into three groups – 'chargers' for those who want a good brisk hike, 'moderates' for those who don't, and (great euphemism) 'more contemplative' for those who can't – here is an opportunity to get away from people altogether for a few moments, to relish the emptiness, the silence, the pure brutal beauty of the Arctic.

For me, at least, it's a reminder to leave the camera in the cabin sometimes, and just let myself drink it all in. It's obvious from their grins that the keenest snappers have got the shots they wanted this week (and they're quick to credit the trip's leaders). But there is wonder written on the faces of us non-photographers too – because only in the flesh do you get to see a polar bear's might-filled muscles ripple in the dusklight, their jaws stretch taut in a lazily-menacing yawn, their easy loping speed and surprising grace as they leap from floe to floe, or the way a cub insinuates himself between his mother's legs while she tries to shoo him away.

Paul might say I'm missing out on a great shot. Then again, he hasn't had to sit through the other 5,544 of them with me.

Go packaged

Arctic cruising takes place only in summer, and the next 'Spitsbergen in Depth' photographic charter with Paul Goldstein departs June 19 2012 for 12 nights, with Exodus (0845 863 9601, www.exodus.co.uk). Prices start at £4,700pp, excluding flights, but including meals and activities, based on two sharing a twin cabin with its own sink, but toilet and shower shared with one other cabin. Doubles with private facilities are available from £5,200. Exodus has other departures throughout the summer, from £5,490pp, based on two sharing as above; or try Discover The World (01737 214252, www.discover-the-world.co.uk). For a more comfortable 'cruise-style' experience, see www.discovercruises.co.uk.

Go independent

Cruising – and indeed hiking, horse-riding, dog-sledding and kayaking – can all be arranged locally in Longyearbyen, where there is a handful of hotels. SAS (0871 226 7760, www.flysas.co.uk) flies there from Heathrow, from £700.

Further information

The official tourist site, www.svalbard.net, is very thorough, and contains safety advice as well as lists of accommodation. For decent shots of polar bears, you'll need some kit: all the shots here were taken using a Nikon D90 with a 70-200mm lens (see www.nikon.co.uk for suppliers). You can hire this sort of thing – and get advice – from www.camerarent.co.uk.

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