

MV Polar Star
THE REMOTE COAST OF EAST GREENLAND
27th August to 7th September 2004

Friday, 27th August
Longyearbyen, Svalbard

Flying north from our home countries we entered the realm of the high Arctic. Anchored in the fjord at Longyearbyen (78° 13' N 015° 36'E), Spitsbergen, we came upon our new floating home, the *MV Polar Star*. Another ship, the *Academic Sergei Vavalov* was alongside the quay so we embarked the ship by zodiac. As soon as everyone was aboard the anchor was lifted and we began our expedition which was eventually to take us to Reykjavik, Iceland. Soon we gathered in the Observation Lounge to meet the team and to learn about the ship. Captain Asbjørn Endresen was introduced and the mandatory safety briefing followed. We donned the bright orange life-jackets and mustered under the lifeboats for the drill. It was then time to find the dining room and enjoy our first meal onboard. After dinner as we left Isfjorden and set out due west into a flat calm Fram Strait. As we watched a film on Svalbard in the Observation lounge the ship stopped, a zodiac was lowered and Laurie, our Expedition Leader, set off to deliver a missing sea chart to the *Academic Sergei Vavalov*. Those who stayed up late watched as the light changed and we slipped further away from land, also seeing several minke whales arch through the water.

Saturday, 28th August
Fram Strait, Greenland Sea

We awoke to lovely calm conditions and excellent visibility – ideal for spotting cetaceans. Soon enough a group of white beaked dolphins were seen, and we continued to encounter these dolphins of the far north throughout the day. During the morning we had a talk by Hannah on the Arctic whales and we vigilantly tried to spot some as we sailed – but with little success, though several minke whales cruised by.

After lunch Kirstin gave a lecture on the Arctic Seabirds. Fulmars were already our constant companion and with Kirstin's help we identified little auks on the water, both juvenile and adult kittiwakes and several puffins. Later we reconvened in the observation lounge to learn about zodiacs and our conduct in the East Greenland National Park and before dinner had our first recap and briefing of the trip. After dinner Jørn entertained us with a stunning presentation of photographs taken during his summer on Svalbard.

Sunday, 29th August
Approaching East Greenland

Many of us woke early with the ship juddering and lurching as we entered the pack ice. We then had the excited call from the bridge that a polar bear had been spotted in the water ahead of the ship! We slowly cruised behind the powerfully swimming bear as it headed around the pack. As we watched the bear clambered onto an ice floe to give us a wonderful view of this top predator as it shook itself and then walked the length of the ice floe before re-entering the water. Moments later it was back onto the ice and we stayed parallel to it as it leaped from floe to floe.

If seeing one bear so early in the morning, and nearly 80 miles from land, was not excitement enough we then came upon another, much younger bear, that was rolling to clean its coat, then stood on its hind legs to watch as we sailed by.

Many of us managed a few hours more sleep before the official wakeup call came. During the morning we had two lectures. Palle was so determined that we would not sleep through his fascinating talk on the 'Sirius Dog Sled Patrol' that he had us doing exercises! Palle had been the commanding officer of this unique Danish Military unit. This was followed by Bill's talk on 'The Whaler and the Inventor; Wilhelm Scoresby and George Mamby'. Outside we re-entered the pack ice and scanned the floes for wildlife. Just before lunch we had our first elusive glimpse of Greenland ahead, and the amazing site of a gyrfalcon in amongst the fulmars swirling around the ship.

As we had made good progress we had time to launch the fleet of zodiacs for a cruise in amongst the ice floes and to investigate a large iceberg. With Laurie taking the lead we also drove the zodiacs up onto an ice flow and stepped out to walk on water. It was cold out so we soon returned for cookies and hot drinks.

We only had a short time to relax before we were lining the decks to see a mother Polar bear and cub that had been spotted relaxing ahead. Captain Asbjørn managed once again to manoeuvre the ship to give us superb views of the bears, that seemed very curious about this large red object in their habitat. We left them, sleeping once again in their icy domain and as we sailed towards the coast we continued to watch the ever-changing scene of ice floes and huge tabular bergs.

Between recap and dinner we cruised along the edge of a tabular berg that was 1.5km long. After dinner Laurie gave his oft delayed talk on 'Eggs; a study of Sea Ice in all its forms and stages of development' - as we crashed and banged, ice breaking through a band of pack ice. With the sun getting lower we made it through the last of the scattered pack ice and dropped anchor for the night at Danmarkshavn.

Monday, 30th August **Danmarkshavn & Mørkefjord**

We awoke to find azure blue fjord waters contrasting with stark, white icebergs and a cloudless blue sky. Our morning was spent landing at, and exploring the area around, the Danmarkshavn weather station (76°54'N 020°02' W). Manned year round by eight men it is one of Europe's most northerly meteorological research stations. Station staff came onboard for breakfast and answered our questions about life and work on the base.

Onshore there was ample time for us to make friends with the bonny sled dogs and visit the historic hut from the 1906-8 Danmark Expedition led by Ludvig Mylius Ericksen, who died on the expedition - along with two of his team. Only the body of the Greenlander, Brönlund was ever found. We walked past the two-hole, wooden "facility" on the bridge over the small rushing river to the hut and then up to the wooden cross - a memorial for trappers and hunters that have lost their lives here over the centuries.

On the ponds above the base was a lovely group of barnacle geese and those that followed Jørn on the long walk around the bay saw Arctic hare at a distance. Those that stayed at the station watched as the 11:00 weather balloon was launched, with out any ceremony, to float rapidly up into the sky to send its important data back to earth.

During lunch we sailed deeper into Dove Bay to land at Mørkefjord (76 °55'N 020 °19'W). Mørkefjord, meaning murky, did not live up to its name today - we had a glorious afternoon of sunshine to enjoy our walk over the tundra. One group scaled the hill behind the huts, whilst the other trekked up the river bed for a close encounter with an Arctic hare. Numerous flowers were seen, saxifrages, harebells and Arctic poppy. We had landed at the site of an abandoned weather station, that was in a sad state of repair, and a summer hut used by personnel from Danmarkshavn that was also in need of attention - animals had entered and the place look a bit of a mess. Outside

were numerous skulls of musk oxen and an impressive dump of empty bottles and barrels. On the beach were the remains of several wooden boats. Amazingly the trio of Gareth, Tove and Kirstin striped off and had a swim in the icy waters before leaving the beach!

Once back onboard we set sail south, cruising down Dove Bugt between the long, narrow island of Store Koldeway and the mainland. Wonderfully sculptured icebergs peppered the sea and the light was marvellous.

After dinner Palle began to narrate a video shot in 1990 that followed a year in the life of the Sirius Patrol, but was soon interrupted by an excited call from the bridge. Two baleen whales were seen blowing very close to the ship. We slowed and turned, all scanning the waters to see where they would surface next. When we could see them again Hannah confirmed that this was a truly remarkable sighting of two bowhead or Greenland whales, from the almost extinct North Atlantic stock. The whales seemed to head away, Palle resumed his talk, but the whales gave us one last show before heading of into the sunset, their V-shaped blows glowing pink. Before the video could end Palle was interrupted once again so we could watch as the moon rose out of the mirror calm pink blushed sea. The wake of the ship glowed iridescent and the moon shadow shimmered on the water.

Tuesday, 31st August

Daneborg, Dødemandsbugten & Wordie Glacier

The whales of yesterday had delayed us slightly so we had a relaxed breakfast and fitted in an engine room tour before our morning landing at Daneborg, the headquarters of the Sirius Patrol. We were greeted ashore by the hunky Danish patrol members who guided us around the base. The Sirius Sled Dog Patrol consists of 6 two man teams with 11 dogs in each patrol. They travel the East Greenland coast to maintain Danish sovereignty by actually stepping on the ground. One hundred and twenty dogs live at the base and each of our group met a team.

We could pat and frolic with the bonny sled dogs and we also met some of this years pups. We visited the old trappers hut now used as a guest house, saw the memorial to the Patrol members killed in WWII, and the small museum that had an exhibit of Palle's hat and shoes! Whilst we toured the site skeins of pink footed geese on migration flew overhead and we noticed that the ground was littered with eider down from the ducks that nest here in the spring.

Returning to the ship one lucky boat load had a close encounter with a walrus in the water and one was later seen ahead of the ship. We were joined onboard by our Danish friends for lunch and afterwards we set sail for the southernend of Clavering Island.

Off Dødemandsbugten (Dead Man's Bay) the zodiacs were launched. We landed at the small hut to see the remains of the Thule Inuit settlement. When the Inuit first spotted Europeans they fled the site, later returning before abandoning it for good. Laurie had given us history lesson before we stepped ashore but it was excellent to see the clear remains of the stone based houses. A Danish weather station had been subsequently built on the site, and this became a military target in WWII. We found shell casings and bullets amongst the rusting oil drums. We wandered through the verdant tundra admiring the dwarf willow and finding hare bells still in flower, and some climbed the low rise to get an overview. We managed to get fine views of musk oxen, either by joining Jørn on a hike or by zodiac with Emily and Hannah. Whilst we had been wandering the wind had picked up and we had a bit of drama with the zodiacs- Emily and Tove took a tumble in the waves, forgetting to take their clothes off to swim!

We then sailed further west and into Godhåb Golf to view the Wordie Glacier. It had retreated a great deal since the sea chart had been produced in 1965. Despite the overcast sky in the late evening we had excellent views of the glacier as the Captain carefully manoeuvred the ship around.

Wednesday, 1st September

Kaiser Franz Joseph Fjord

Wake up found us in fog of Myggbukta (Mosquito Bay) at the southern end of Hold With Hope peninsula. A heavy swell meant that the landing had to be abandoned so the morning was taken up with lectures and engine room tours as we sailed through Foster Bay and into Kaiser Franz Joseph Fjord. Bill began with a talk on the fascinating history of the German weather stations during the Second World War. Then Kirsten filled us in on the land birds of the high Arctic.

Before lunch we turned out of Kaiser Franz Joseph fjord and into Nordfjord to do a landing at the Strindburg trappers hut and the renovated Sirius Dog Sled Patrol hut. Palle opened it up and we were impressed by the matches sticking out ready to be struck to light the lamps and the copious supply of beers! Lorie led a walk up the ridge behind the base. Two bright white Arctic hares were spotted on the way up, along with numerous musk ox dropping. From the top we gained an overview of the ship in the fjord below and up into the river valley with an azure coloured lake beyond. Jørns group stopped to study the plants as they walked around the beach area and over the tundra plain. They then rounded the corner and peaked into the valley beyond. Both groups came upon fox traps – simple wooden platforms on which boulders are placed that drop and crush inquisitive foxes.

We reboarded the ship for the hour long sail deeper into the fjord where the zodiacs were once again launched and the whole fleet set out to visit the Walterhausen glacier. We cruised along the face admiring the ice caves and waterfalls. Several boats saw seals, both ringed and bearded and a lucky few had gyrfalcon fly overhead.

After dinner we watched a film on polar bears as we approached Tüfelsschloss, the Devil's castle, a particularly imposing mountain. The bands and convolutions in the rock face were still visible in the late evening light and the swirling low level alto stratus lenticular clouds added atmosphere. Many remained on the bridge as we navigated the narrow channels, dodging huge beautiful icebergs, towards Renbugten, where we would anchor over night.

Thursday, 2nd September

Renbugten & Ella Island

We awoke to mirror calm waters that reflected the superb mountain and icebergs scenery surrounding the ship. Clouds drifted and swirled and then lifted to reveal the new snow on the mountain tops.

After breakfast we began to load the zodiacs to head ashore for a landing at Renbugten, a classic U-shaped glaciated valley. The first few boats sped away before a temperamental iceberg drifted up to the gangway and refused to budge until the engines were started and the ship moved, not before the iceberg had scraped itself down the side of the ship. Once ashore we all set off to walk over the tundra on the look out for musk oxen and Arctic flowers. Broad-leaved willow herb (the National flower of Greenland) was found still in flower, as was moss campion, Arctic heather and mountain avens. We passed the musk ox scratching post – a glacial erratic rock surrounded by footprints and shed hair, and came upon the desiccated carcass of an ox, as well as numerous skulls. We could see several animals on the far hill side and the long walkers following Gareth saw several cross the river.

Once we were back on board we left Kaiser Franz Joseph fjord to sail through the narrow channel between Ymer Island and Suess Land. Striped mountains towered either side, and huge icebergs filled the fjords.

We landed in the afternoon at the Sirius Supply Base on Ella Island. They use boats during the summer to drop supplies to many of the huts in the area, but the personnel had now left for the winter and the base was closed up. New boats were wrapped up on the shore and old wooden boats

remained in situ. We were able to enter the old research building, which has been maintained in better order than some of the other huts we have seen. Jørn led a hike along 'Palle's Path' to the airstrip and beyond to view the mountains and see a musk ox battle. Red throated divers were seen on the lake and flew overhead calling like ducks.

Back onboard and as soon as recap was over we filled the bridge as we rounded the Bastion, an impressive cliff face on the east end of Ella Island, rising sheer from the water to 1,367m (4,480 Ft). After dinner Palle re-showed the film about the Sirius Patrol. By days end we were cruising through Narhvalsund and into Kong Oscar Fjord.

Friday, 3rd September **Alpefjord & Holm Bugt**

We had anchored overnight at the entrance to Alpefjord and wake up call found us beginning to cruise down the fjord and in a different kind of Arctic weather – overcast and drizzling. The landscape around us had subtly changed, until now all the mountains had glaciated rounded tops but the peaks either side of the ship were now more dramatic, all jagged points, that appeared and disappeared out of clouds as the morning progressed. Straight after breakfast we were out in the zodiacs to investigate the Sefstrøm Glacier. Every zodiac had a slightly different experience, but all witnessed the grandeur of the landscape, the crevasses, icy pinnacles and sculpture garden of icebergs. We landed at the glacial moraine and watched a chunk of ice calf off the end of the glacier, the wave produced was enough to release a zodiac from its beach mooring! The rain had eased off for our excursion but light drizzle began to fall once more as we sailed back along Alpefjord and out into Kong Oscar Fjord.

After dinner Laurie gave a talk on 'Icebreaker Technology' before our landing at Mestervig. Prior to dropping anchor we passed the disused dock and numerous buildings of the abandoned lead mine at Nyhavn. We zodiaced through the narrow entrance of Noret Bay to land on the sand spit, and were greeted by the two Sirius Patrol men that now man Mestervig. Walking over to the extensive base, much of which is now closed down, we crossed the long runway that used to be the 'International Airport' in these parts, with weekly flights from Denmark and Iceland. A runway has now been built at Illoqqortoormiut and with the mines closure the runway is used only in emergencies and as a refuelling spot. Many of us went over to meet and pat the team of sled dogs before returning to the ship.

As we sailed through Davis Bay the wind began to pick up and the film after dinner 'Rounding Cape Horn', with its high seas, merged with the reality outside as we came out into the Greenland Sea.

Saturday, 4th September **Illoqqortoormiut & Scoresbysund**

Through the night a gale had been blowing, but fortunately we had following sea so the movement on the ship had not been too bad. Not long after breakfast we could make out the brightly painted houses of Illoqqortoormiut (Scoresby Sund - 70° 28'N, 021° 59'W). We were soon ashore to visit the most northerly permanent settlement in East Greenland. About 550 people live here, mostly Inuit, with a few Danes. At the little church we met up with our local guides who led us around town.

During the tour we passed the post office and store, the school and sports centre, the monument to Charcot, the French Explorer, the cemetery and jail. We saw a helicopter come into land and enjoyed a cup of coffee in the womens' centre. Sled dogs were tethered between the wooden houses, many with young pups that ran out to greet us and children rode by and posed for photographs. In the shop we investigated the range of products on sale, everything from naughty videos, to guns, ammunition, clothing and chewing gum -we were mostly interested in the postcards and maps.

Once our visit was over we did some final exploring in Greenland by crossing the entrance of Scoresby Sund to look at the high cliffs and numerous tidewater glaciers on the south side. A huge iceberg, grounded in 250m of water, loomed over the ship and many were unstable, rocking to and fro. We then rounded Kap Brewster and set off towards Iceland; receding land and icebergs glowed in the late evening sun, a change from the drizzle of the day. Before and during recap whale blows were seen, but the animals remained elusive.

Sunday, 5th September

Denmark Strait

We awoke to better sea conditions than expected and mist rose and fell over the rolling white capped sea. During the morning Laurie gave a talk on his amazing trek across the North Pole – ‘The Polar Bridge’. Before Kirsten’s talk a humpback whale was spotted – it blew and sounded several times revealing its white tail flukes, but despite slowing and turning the ship the whale remained at some distance. As we were watching for the whale a small pod of white beaked dolphins came very close into the bow. Once the dolphins had left us Kirsten told us about her work on ‘Polymorphism in Arctic Skuas’, and the sea conditions worsened again.

After lunch a movie, ‘Map of the Human Heart’, was shown and we continued to have mixed sea and weather conditions. Squalls came and went and at one point we had a marvellous double rainbow. As we had made good progress overnight, with help from the East Greenland current, we had time to indulge in a fishing competition on the back deck. Lines were lowered, advice given, but only seven fish reeled in. These were cooked up by dinner time and we enjoyed them before the special – Scoresbysund Musk Ox Stew.

We had our final re-cap in the Observation Lounge, for tomorrow we would arrive in Reykjavik and spend the evening exploring ashore. Bubbly toasts were drunk to the ship and the voyage and we discussed our favourite moments on board. As night fell and we had some of the first real darkness of the trip we noticed the faint streaking of the Aurora Borealis – the Northern lights. As we watched the curtains and streaks got brighter and fainter again – a magic end to the day.

Monday, 6th September

At Sea & Reykjavik

We awoke off the east coast of Iceland cruising in the Breidhasjardhur. The sea conditions were still rough and squalls blew in from time to time. Just before breakfast the Captain announced a whale – a breaching minke was ahead of the ship, but it soon disappeared in the waves. We had a final briefing and by 11:30 we were making our final approach, at midday we picked up the pilot and came alongside the quayside in the heart of Reykjavik.

Here our journey would end, tomorrow we would disembark and scatter. We have travelled 1717 nautical miles, seeing one of the remotest places in the world. We have enjoyed the ice, the landscapes, the wildlife and people along the way, and all in the good company found onboard the MV Polar Star.