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I've been searching for:
a polar bear."*

IN SEARCH OF POLAR BEARS

Setting sail in Svalbard, Norway, on a quest to find the largest bears on Earth.

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY JENNIFER BUEGE

GAZING OUT OVER THE MOSTLY FROZEN ARCTIC SEA,

I see glittering shades of white in the snowscape, blues tinting the small pools of water between ice floes, even some gray hanging out in the nooks and crannies hidden from the glare of the 24-hour sun.

One of the naturalists tries to direct me: “See that jagged piece of dirty ice just below the horizon? Come down about two inches. It’s right there.” Peering through my telephoto lens, I wonder how I’ll ever be able to pick out *that* blob of ice from the infinite number before me. “It’s raising its head!” someone says softly. Suddenly I see it, the off-white lump that I’ve been searching for: a polar bear. The captain slowly urges the ship forward, breaking through the ice to

bring us within a couple hundred feet of our quarry. Everything is silent save for the clicking of camera shutters as we capture the bear doing bear stuff: lunging at us, pacing back and forth across the ice and, finally, yawning, his long tongue (black, like his fur-covered skin) lolling out of his mouth. We’re not his only audience; two ivory gulls loiter nearby, hoping at some point to enjoy the leftovers of a kill. Eventually, the bear ambles away toward the horizon and the birds fly off, disappointed. But I’m not. I’ve just seen my first polar bear in the wild.

These giant marine mammals are why my boyfriend and I find ourselves, in early June, on the deck of the *Ocean Adventurer*, only eight degrees away from the North Pole. Three days earlier, we boarded the ship in the world’s northernmost town, Longyearbyen, the launch point for most of the Arctic Circle cruises in Norway. We would be spending almost two weeks with 125 other passengers on a Quark Expeditions trip called “In Search of





Polar Bears,” a name that came with high expectations. And in less than 72 hours, those expectations had been exceeded.

Although there are several places where you can see polar bears in their natural habitat, one of the draws of Svalbard is the bounty of other wildlife. Our first day at sea, while cruising in Zodiacs along cliffs near the 14th of July Glacier, we watched as a hungry Arctic fox stole its way into a nest—past a squawking, pecking mother barnacle goose—and hustled away with an egg. We also lucked upon a circus of puffins, the birds torpedoing between land and sea, and cruised past icebergs dotted with red-legged gulls.

Unlike the barren landscape that I thought we’d be encountering, we’re met instead with dramatic vistas decorated with surprising pops of color. Most imposing are the mottled, snow-capped mountains that jut into the sky, their surfaces draped with spring-green moss. But smaller surprises exist. On one island, tiny purple and pink flowers poke their heads out of the rocky ground. And as clouds flit across the sky, aqua, teal and myriad other shades of blue are reflected in the ice chunks drifting around us.

For the next week-and-a-half, we make our way clockwise around the numerous islands that comprise Svalbard, foregoing a set itinerary for one dictated by the ice. Midway through the trip, the midnight sun that’s been our constant companion is replaced by mist and a sky thick with gray clouds. A storm’s brewing. Fierce winds kick in, rocking the boat, and we take refuge in our cabin while the captain steers into the more protected waters of Faksevågen. »



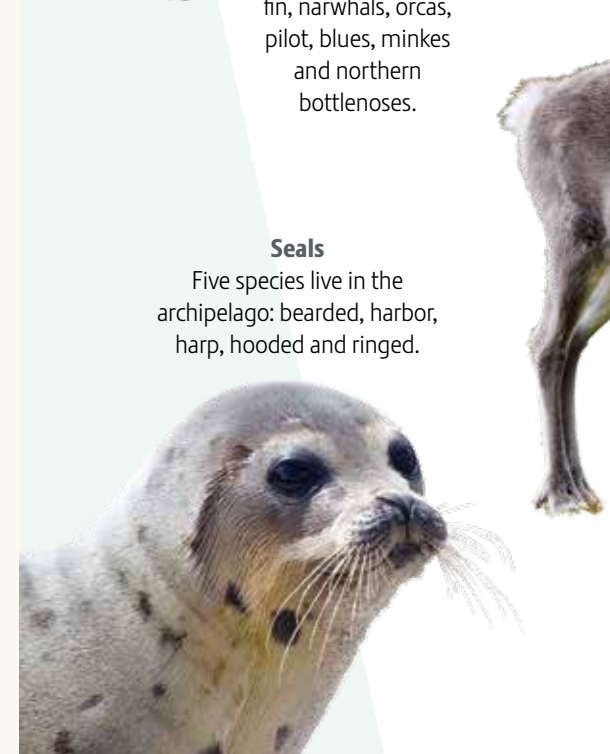
Birds

Black guillemots, king eiders, little auks, snow buntings, kittiwakes, rock ptarmigans and Atlantic puffins are just a few of the 150-plus species that have been recorded in Svalbard.



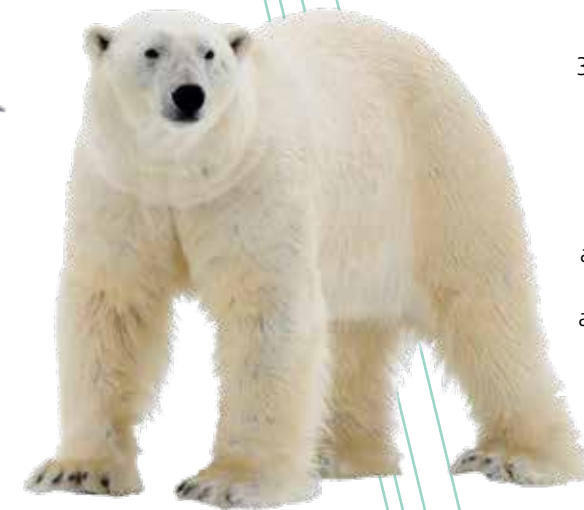
Whales

Types include Belugas, humpbacks, fin, narwhals, orcas, pilot, blues, minkes and northern bottlenoses.



Seals

Five species live in the archipelago: bearded, harbor, harp, hooded and ringed.



Polar Bears

Approximately 3,000 of these Arctic stars live in the Barents Sea area around Svalbard, spending as much time as possible among the drift ice, hunting for seals and fattening up for the winter.

Animals of Svalbard

A look at the birds and mammals that call the archipelago home.



Arctic Fox

This yearlong resident has two morphs, or variations: white (white coat in winter, brownish-gray in summer) and blue (dark coat in winter that lightens up slightly in summer).



Svalbard Reindeer

This subspecies of reindeer is endemic to the area.



Walrus

Despite recent population growth after years of being hunted, these tusked creatures are still considered vulnerable. About 3,500 of them can be found in Svalbard year-round.

PREPARING FOR AN ARCTIC EXCURSION

Even as a winter-hardened Minnesotan, I was a bit unsure how to pack for the Arctic. I'd never been that far north before, and I didn't want to be cold. So I started with the typical winter advice—layer, layer, layer—and went from there.

On most multiday cruises, you'll receive a heavy-duty parka (yours to keep) and muck boots (yours to borrow). The jackets often have a zip-out fleece lining that can be worn on warmer days; the boots keep feet warm and dry off the boat. The atmosphere onboard is typically laid-back, so leave your dress-up clothes at home. Instead, you'll want to pack:

- A variety of long underwear (natural fibers are great)
- Sweaters, sweatshirts and casual pants as a middle layer
- Rubber-soled shoes for onboard the ship (boots or hiking/tennis shoes)
- Wool socks
- Warm waterproof gloves or mittens with a removable liner
- Waterproof rain pants
- A scarf and a hat or balaclava
- Sunglasses with U.V. protection
- A dry bag to protect cameras and phones from the water



By the time we wake the next day, the sea has calmed, and we're able to make our way south through the Hinlopen Strait. Soon we're rewarded with an incredible sight: Alkefjellet, aka the "bird cliffs," home to more than 60,000 pairs of Brünnich's guillemots that have come to the area to nest. Thousands upon thousands of them speckle the sky, trying to find a vacant spot on the cliffs, while the rest huddle on the ledges they've managed to claim. A naturalist tells us that these birds need the least amount of personal space of any. That's a good thing, since they're packed in wing to wing.

The weather continues to improve, and the next morning we hop into our rubber rafts and head for the island of Wahlbergøya. The crew has spotted a handful of walrus there.

After landing, we make our way single file toward the pod, our bright yellow parkas like little suns dotting the snowy landscape. The walrus snuggle up against each other for warmth, their bodies pockmarked with old scars and signs of more recent battles. We're lucky, we're told; it's not always easy to find these magnificent creatures this early in the summer.

On our second Zodiac expedition that afternoon, our driver's walkie-talkie crackles. Another group has caught sight of a polar bear on land nearby. We zoom off in its direction and arrive to find a large male who has just finished a seal meal. The fur around his mouth is colored with blood, the snow nearby as well. Satisfied, he's settled in for a nap. After lingering for 30 minutes or so, we're sated as well and set course

for the ship, ready to end what's been a fabulous day. That's when we hear the low, echoing grunting. Coming around a bend, we're greeted by walruspalooza: A couple hundred of the tusked animals bob through the water ahead of us, while others sun themselves on ice floes. We cut the engine and drift, taking in the scene and the sounds. When we finally leave for our floating home, a few of the walrus follow us for a bit as if seeing us off.

The remainder of the trip is spent exploring fjords, making landings when possible and, of course, keeping an eye out for polar bears. One day, we sail past a mother and her two cubs, the kids scampering about while mom waits by a seal hole, hoping to catch dinner. Another morning, we watch anxiously as a male bear and

a group of four reindeer slowly make their way toward each other across the rugged landscape of the Freemanbreen glacier, its brown-and-white-striped hulk looming over them. Their meeting provokes an unexpected reaction: The bear flees up the side of the cliff until the deer pass.

By the time we land in Longyearbyen, we've spotted 11 bears in total. We've also seen a rare blue morph Arctic fox, several whales, a couple herds of reindeer, three varieties of seals and more birds than we ever imagined existing in this icy region. Having opted to go Wi-Fi-free on the trip, we weren't capturing Instagram moments but living in the moment. We were fortunate enough to observe life at the top of the world, and I have to say—it's a pretty amazing view. 📍



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is a travel editor who lives and works to explore the globe.

She's up for any adventure: mountain biking in Borneo, gorilla trekking in Rwanda or eating her way through Vietnam. This was her first time visiting Norway, but she'll be back.