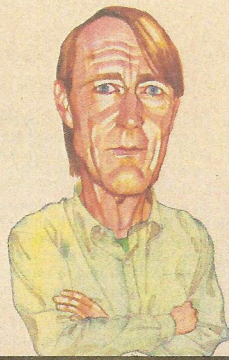


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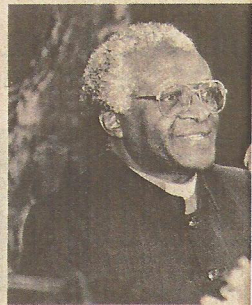
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The battle for London's African he

The Africa Centre in Covent Garden was, according to Archbishop Desmond Tutu, a 'home from home' for a generation involved in the struggle for liberation. Can high-profile campaigners stop the building's sale and restore it as a symbol of 21st-century Africa? William W

If you wished to savour the full extent of black culture in London today, you might head east to Dalston to eat Ghanaian *kenke*, south to Brixton market to fill your fridge with ingredients for an *egusi* sauce, then north again to Walthamstow for a dose of fire and brimstone at a Nigerian church that boasts the single largest congregation in London. Or you might sink a quick Primus beer in Tottenham at the Congolese dive Papa Mapasa, before heading south to hear visiting African politicians at the Royal Institute of International Affairs at Chatham House. With luck, you might catch an African band performing at the Barbican, in the City, before close of play.

You would, in short, have to spend a lot of hours on the Tube or bus. Nowhere in the former capital of empire, home to more than a million Africans or people of African descent, is there a central venue showcasing the creative strides that contemporary Africa and diaspora Africans are making in business, literature and the arts. Nor is there an obvious meeting place where Ethiopians can rub shoulders with Zimbabweans, or black artists and activists mix with black bankers and lawyers. Africa in 21st-century London is as scattered as your day would be trying to locate its many parts.

For generations of people from – or engaged with – Africa, things were once different. From its opening by Kenneth Kaunda, Zambia's first president, in 1964, until the turn of the century, the Africa Centre at 38 King Street, Covent Garden, was a place where anyone could eat, drink, dance, read and talk all things Africa under one (increasingly leaky) roof.

Leading African politicians, heads of

pointed by invitation and, since the membership list lapsed, effectively unaccountable to anyone but itself.

The Africa Centre has been in decline for years; it is no longer the place people go to celebrate African culture. Yet news of the building's proposed sale provoked outrage among those for whom it remained a kind of symbol of Africa in the wider world.

Chipo Chung, a social activist and actress of Zimbabwean origin, whose mother's university education in the 1960s was financed by a trust housed at the Africa Centre, is among those who have led a campaign to save the site, organising a petition that has gathered about 3,000 signatures (including mine before I began to research this article). More strikingly, it has helped galvanise a consortium of African business luminaries, architects, musicians and continental leaders into a last-minute rescue mission.

Those lending their support include Tutu, Jean Ping, chairman of the commission of the African Union, Mo Ibrahim, the Sudanese philanthropist and telecoms billionaire, Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian Nobel literature laureate and Youssou

recently appointed new members, voted almost unanimously to endorse the sale last month at an extraordinary general meeting called as a result of pressure from the campaign. But they have granted a stay of execution, apparently realising that it would be a public relations disaster to dismiss the moral authority of Tutu, and the credentials of Ibrahim and Adjaye, who believe the building can be saved. The rescue team was given six weeks to raise millions of pounds to rehabilitate the building and to provide a plan that would solve the centre's chronic financing problems.

For Chung, success is essential, not only to save a piece of the African community's London heritage but to demonstrate how African leadership can work. "We can either present our community as poor and helpless and unable to make things work," she says. "Or we can prove that we have gained the social capital and vision for what Africa could be in the next century."

It is not the first time 38 King Street has been held up as something of a mirror to Africa's fortunes. The building began life in the 18th century as a banana warehouse – where, folklore has it, slaves were sold. It later became an auction house and, among other things, sold Benin bronzes from Nigeria. It was bought by the Catholic Church and, in 1962, gifted to the African community in its broadest sense. The idea was to provide a social, political and cultural platform at the heart of London for Africans and people interested in the continent during a period of tumultuous change. When it opened, the nearby piazza in Covent Garden was still a vegetable market, its environs a scruffy home to artisans, second-

History Above, clockwise from main: Kenyan troupe Wazalendo pay tribute to the Mau Mau Freedom Fighters at the Africa Centre, 1983; Sally Mugabe at the Afro-European Fashion Show, 1969; Desmond Tutu at the centre, 1994; events posters; then Labour leader Neil Kinnock at the 'Apartheid's War' exhibition, 1986. Below: 38 King Street; architect David Adjaye

Courtesy of the Africa Centre; Ash Sakula; Linda Nyland

has allowed the charity to draw in NGOs, a shop and consultancies. core auction hall and rear of the continue to decay. The glass lect which once beamed light down elegant mezzanine floor, has lo boarded up. In a warren of bac valuable art works collect dust, arc jumbled in boxes and mould is s across the walls. There is one e running a skeleton programme of

By the time Capco approached tees with a £10.5m offer, mai already convinced that the only save the charity was to sell the l They were frustrated that an a

Continued o



Cold comfort

note radio transmitter in Svalbard has been converted into the world's most northerly boutique hotel. By Carole Cadwalladr

There are an awful lot of beards in Longyearbyen. I'm not even out of the arrivals hall of the airport – surely the only airport in the world to feature a luggage carousel with a stuffed polar bear baring its teeth slap in the middle of it – when I realise that Norwegian men are built on a different scale from elsewhere. All around us are great man-mountains, grizzled and perma-tanned, with the beards of Arctic explorers and faces that look as if they've weathered years of sub-zero temperatures and winds that have blown in straight from the North Pole.

But then they probably have. Because Svalbard is not just up north, it's about as far north as you can possibly go. I'm still in a mild state of shock from the casual glance I took at Google Maps roughly half an hour before I caught my flight. It's further north than most of Greenland. It's as far north from the furthest tip of Scotland as Athens is south. It is extreme north. And yet, even more incredibly, it's just two shortish flights from London. One minute you're wondering around Heathrow Terminal Five looking at designer sandals and a few hours later you're plunged into the kind of landscape that's vaguely familiar from documentaries about doomed men stranded on pack-ice trying to decide whether to eat their dogs or each other.

It is, says Brita, the managing director of Basecamp Explorer, the company I'm travelling with, a "borderline place". The weather can change in an instant, which means that when we arrive at Longyearbyen airport, though the sun is shining and the sky is clear, we're led off to be kitted out in vast insulated drysuits. They're like huge, orange Babygros and we waddle off, sweating, to our boat – a rubber rib – that is going to take us to Isfjord Radio, a remote former radio station that Basecamp has turned into a hotel.

In fact, it takes about 10 seconds to be grateful for the survival suits. The sun may be shining and the sea sparkling but it's an optical illusion of the Arctic variety: it's properly freezing out on the water as we bounce over the waves, guillemots and puffins circling overhead. A couple of hours later, we see the transmitter masts and vast satellite dishes of Isfjord Radio, defunct now but preserved as a reminder of Svalbard's past, when it was a crucial communications centre. It's impressive that such recent history has been protected – the station stopped functioning only in 2004 when fibre optic cable arrived, and Svalbard some of the fastest broadband in the world. But then when it comes to history in Svalbard, most of it is recent.

Trappers have been coming to the archipelago since the 15th century and, later, whalers but they didn't leave many marks and it was only in 1920 that it was formally recognised as part of Norway. Mining became its mainstay with Longyearbyen a company town, a legacy that lives on today in that it has no old people: they're shipped to the mainland.

It's always been a peripheral place, pitch dark for four months of the year, and simply brutally difficult for most of the rest of it. Although, on a bright July day, it's also breathtakingly beautiful. Deceptively so. We gaze over the shimmering water at the ice-capped mountains on the other side of the fjord but when I stride off towards the hotel to dump my bag, Camilla, one of the women who works there, comes running after me, a rifle in her hand. It's a distance of only 100 yards but she tells me: "You mustn't walk alone. In case of the polar bears." It is, in many ways, a preposterous place for a hotel. And yet, this being Scandinavia, it's not even just any hotel, but a really rather delightful one, all soft greys, polished wood, cashmere throws and comfy



Extremes The group taking a boat trip to Trygghaven, main picture; the stylish interior of the Isfjord Radio hotel, above right, and its more functional exterior, bottom left. The guide is armed at all times in case of polar bear attack, bottom right. Roger Norum



armchairs. It's the world's most northerly boutique hotel.

"We'd never have been able to build a hotel here," says Brita. "It's only because all the infrastructure was in place because of its history. And even then..." and she tails off, the memory of working out the logistics of shipping every single last fork and plate to a remote Arctic outpost, 78.08 degrees north, seemingly still just a little bit painful.

Right outside the front door are two eider duck nests – they feel safer, apparently, being close to people, although they quack indignantly and waddle off any time anyone opens the door. Offshore, we spot a pod of whales passing by. Outside on the tundra, plump, stocky reindeer wander, and out on the boat, we see a magnificent pair of walrus. And then, of course, there are the polar bears. Theoretically, at least.

"Which direction do they come from?" asks Hamme, a Norwegian who works with the country's tourist board. "Any direction," says Brita. Hamme, who I'm suspecting may have spent too long in London, looks slightly less than comforted by this answer.

We're here in June and even Brita is amazed by the weather: it's so clear and still, with hardly a breath of wind. Most astonishing of all, though, is the light. The amazing Arctic light. It's the kind of light that makes you feel disoriented, drunk, off-kilter; like being on mild hallucinogens.

On our first evening we eat a fine three-course meal of Norwegian specialities, but then, though it's been a long day, it seems out of the question to go to bed. It's 11pm but still full daylight so we go for a walk with Martin, our guide. At midnight it still feels like two in the afternoon: the sun has barely dipped. Even the eider ducks look confused, wandering around, quacking disconsolately instead of being tucked up in their nests asleep. But then it's not hard to

see why. This isn't like the "white nights" of St Petersburg or Helsinki; it's full-on daylight. The next day we meet a band of volunteers who've come to repaint one of the buildings in return for food and board, and one of them, another of the man-mountains, Terje, tells me how the night before they'd gone to camp beside a neighbouring fjord. "And it's the only time in my life that I've had to apply suntan cream before I went to bed."

They're all a bit emotional, the volunteers. They had a bit of a weep beside the fjord, they tell us. Svalbard is a special place by anybody's reckoning but it seems to have a mystical hold over Norwegian hearts. Terje, a carpenter, is on a true busman's holiday: he's come to work as a carpenter for a week. But Svalbard is special, he tells me: it's so peaceful. "Oh," I say, "where do you live normally?" thinking that he must live in downtown Oslo, or the one vaguely traffic-filled street in its second city, Bergen. "On top of a mountain outside Stavanger," he says.

They're not quite as hard as they look though. Brita suggests a swim in the morning but only the British visitors show up. But then, it's just possible that we've all been gripped by a touch of polar madness. There's a touch of grim Shackleton-like do-or-dielessness about us as we plunge into the freezing water, swearing, while Camilla stands guard with her rifle. She's a crack shot, it turns out, having hunted as a child. What did you hunt, someone asks her. She's a typically pretty, milk-faced Norwegian girl. "Bunny rabbits," she says.

Toughing it out in Svalbard through the polar night, from November to March, takes a special sort of person. What's it like when the winter darkness descends, I ask Martin, our guide. "We get drunk," he says. "Very drunk."

In summer though, it's simply a special sort of idyllic. Most people come for two or three nights, spending their time on guided hikes and boat trips, bird-watching or just listening to the Arctic silence. We take the boat over to a nearby fjord, Trygghaven, and it's so sparkingly perfect, so white and pristine, with a snow-topped mountain reflected into the still blue waters, that it's hard not to come over a touch Norwegian and have a bit of a weep. Mark, one of our group who went to Antarctica on his honeymoon, says: "Basically, it looks the same. There are different seals and penguins instead of puffins, but that's about it."

Except flying to Antarctica takes forever and costs the earth, and Svalbard is right

here, at the top of Europe, just a few hours away. None of us want to leave Isfjord Radio, it's such a strange, otherworldly place. But then, the whole of Svalbard is a strange, otherworldly place. On the way back we stop to stare at Barentsburg, a depressing-looking town in the middle of nowhere. It's wholly Russian, a little bit of the Soviet Union left stranded in Norway. The rights of the Russians were enshrined in the 1920 Svalbard Treaty, and they've clung on, even as the USSR collapsed, though the statue of Lenin still stands.

By the time we return, Longyearbyen, which had seemed so tiny and ramshackle when we arrived, now looks like a heaving metropolis. And although it's liberating to be able to walk around unaccompanied by a woman with a gun – the city limits are considered a polar bear-free zone – it's not without its dangers.

In a shack above Longyearbyen, I'm just about to tuck into a plate of reindeer stew when a smell of burning fills the air. I've brushed against a candle, it turns out, and my hair is on fire. It's a rough and dangerous place, Svalbard: forget the polar bears, though, what you really want to look out for are the Ikea tea-lights.

Details

A four-night package with Basecamp Explorer (www.basecampexplorer.com) costs from NOK 10,930 (£1,228), with two nights in Longyearbyen and two at Isfjord Radio. Scandinavian Airlines (www.flysas.com) fly to Longyearbyen from Oslo. See also www.visitnorway.com

Travel

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