



BLUE YONDER
*A former trapper's station
at Bollnesholm, Svalbard,
in the Norwegian Arctic*

I am trussed up in a sled covered in skins and furs. My scarf is wrapped, chadar-like, around my face so that only my eyes are on display, the wind chill icing up my lashes and freezing my cheeks into a smile. The huskies are straining on their harnesses, yapping in anticipation and manically eating snow. Then the chief musher Hans gives the command, and Simon the photographer, standing behind me on the sled, takes his foot off the brake and releases the 'anchor' and we are off, shooting down the glacier with a whoop, the dogs suddenly focused and quiet, galloping in joyful unison, tails held high. It's the second week in February and the polar night is all-embracing – offering, as the explorer RA Glen puts it, a kind of 'mystery, pregnant with eternity'; the sun only beginning to rise over the horizon after the 16th. We are as close to the North Pole as it is possible to go outside an ice-breaking ship.

In the gloom, with my line of vision restricted to the bobbing hindquarters of the six huskies tethered in pairs in front of me, I sit back in my warm cocoon and listen to the overriding sound of silence, heightened by the slicing of metal skids against ice and the panting of the hounds. A more exhilarating way to travel is hard to imagine; it feels so right, so harmonious, mushing through the snow on this traditional form of Arctic transport. It is man, beast and landscape in perfect synchronicity, and the best evocation of freedom there is.

As midday approaches, wisps of light from the south transform the landscape, which, free of shadows, is clear, blue and luminous as a Fox's Glacier Mint. Highlighted in front of me I can now make out the wide, frozen river valleys and jutting peaks of the Svalbard – the Viking name for these islands on the cold rim of the world.

With a team of dogs you can travel up to 60 miles a day, and I had hoped that the sea would have frozen over deep enough to enable us to take the dogs and tents on the three-day expedition to the hundred-year-old schooner *Noorderlicht*, frozen into the pack ice. In late winter and early spring, before the thaw, it becomes a most unusual place to stay. But nature is one thing that neither the tour operator nor all the money in the world can control; this year the sea refused to ice over until quite late in the season, and with the surface too thin and unstable for dogs and sleds, the ship was a no-go area.

So instead we embark on a journey on skidoos across country to the old radio station on Cape Linne, the outermost spit of land facing the wild Barents Sea. It was once used as a base for spying on Russian activities in the neighbouring coalmining outpost at Barentsburg during the Cold War. Today it operates as a cosy wilderness 'camp' for expeditions from the main settlement at Longyearbyen. With the surrounding looming sea cliffs and jagged mountain peaks, the aspect here is bleak and lonely, the sky reflecting the vast blackness of the sea, as dark and forbidding as it is majestic, fascinating and beautiful.

And then it happens: my very first sighting of the northern lights – green, genie-like twirls of phosphorescent light that magically appear on the horizon and fill the sky above the town. I lie back in the snow and watch

We stroll gingerly to the shoreline, keeping an eye open for polar bears, whose protected population of 3,000 on Svalbard outnumbers humans and who, when challenged, can run faster than a skidoo. It is with some relief that we retreat to the cosy warmth of the former staff quarters of the radio station, with its stylishly minimalist Nordic interiors, open fires and snug pe on sofas. Saunas and a snack of aquavit and seal crackers at the hearth restore the spirit and blood flow, while the wind rattles at the windows and howls outside.

After a day in the saddle, driving in helmets and padded boots through the polar darkness, you are happy to be rid of the noisy skidoos. However, once I had mastered the art of staying upright and not capsizing the brute, the speed at which we could travel was exhilarating, and following our trusty ex-SAS guide, Claus, we covered great distances. We crossed many varied terrains, from iced-over riverbeds to glacier summits; we zigzagged around gullies, skidded across wide open plains and roared past the Russian settlement at Barentsburg, a sad, dilapidated-looking place, with its tumbledown former trapper houses of slate and stone, and the coal dust from the power station leaving a grey streak on the pristine white landscape.

We saw no one and nothing but stumpy reindeer keeping warm under thin veils of snow, and marvelled at how they eked out an existence through the harsh Arctic winter. But after lunch – a standing picnic of boil-in-the-bag chicken tikka – I thought I might have preferred to exist on the low grassweed that they sought out to keep their digestive juices working.

And then, without any warning, as we packed away the coffee mugs, a fog descended, which turned into a blizzard and we were in a total whiteout – riding right out of our comfort zone through a blank canvas, unable to make out the hands in front of our faces, let alone tell sky from ground. Feeling so small in such

an alien environment with the elements raging around was a humbling experience and a salutary lesson to remind us all that this was the high Arctic, not a winter-wonderland theme park or zoo. The unpredictability, I told myself as I blinked through the flurry of snow, was all part of the adventure that I had signed up for. In crocodile file, like obedient schoolchildren, we followed the orange glow of Claus' rear skidoo light, putting all our trust in him. And we never lost faith, even when the sheet of ice beneath his machine creaked, cracked and split asunder, and the wheels sank into the freezing water of the sleeping river below and his skidoo had to be towed by the people at Cape Linne.

But I am wrung-out tired like I have never been before when we finally find our way back to our bunks in Longyearbyen, the main town, at Basecamp Trapper's Hotel, an atmospheric driftwood-and-slate place furnished with old packing cases and hurricane lamps to recreate the atmosphere of a hunter's hut. Bug-eyed, yet buzzing in adrenalin-fuelled overdrive, we restore ourselves to sanity over a five-course blowout dinner



LIFE IN THE FREEZER

From left: reindeer in Svalbard. The ice-bound wharves of Nordfriesland in Trassenfjorden, Netherlands's islands. A former trapper's hut in Dutch island. Right: team of huskies pulling sled across the island.





at Huset, the local cultural centre, and balloon glasses of cognac later under the observatory-style windows of the hotel's loft living room. And then it happens: my very first sighting of the northern lights, aurora borealis – green, genie-like twirls of phosphorescent light that magically appear on the horizon and fill the sky above the town. I run out in my padded ski suit and lie on my back in the snow in the sub-zero temperature and watch as the whorls and wisps merge and mutate, and then fade like ghosts and whispers back into the endless black of the polar night.

ARCTIC ESSENTIALS

When to go

The optimum season is **between late February and early March**, when, after more than two months, the polar night slowly loses its grip and the days grow gradually longer. On clear days, the sky glows in different tones of blue, pink and purple. It is a stunning time of year. The northern lights are best viewed in the darkest period, which is **November to February**, although they can be seen as early as late August and as late as mid-April. Sightings cannot be guaranteed, but Svalbard, away from towns and areas with light pollution, is as good a place as any.

Where to stay

Basecamp Trapper's Hotel in Longyearbyen, with its old-hunting lodge atmosphere and cosy wood-panelled sitting rooms and bunk bedrooms, is full of character and charm (though the bathroom, with plastic open showers, need upgrading). **Basecamp Isfjord Radio** at Cape Line is attractively decorated and serves delicious diners, and there is a good wine list. This is an expedition lodge, so do not expect luxury. Some of the rooms are very small and bathroom facilities are basic and communal, unless you book the largest suites. The schooner **Noorderlicht** has 10 comfortable cabins and is like nowhere else you will ever stay. It normally freezes in Tempelfjorden between the end of February and May, and can be reached by dog sled or snowmobile in a day from Longyearbyen.



STAY OF THE ARCTIC:
The sitting room at **Basecamp Isfjord Radio**, Cape Line.
Above: the view from **Basecamp Isfjord Radio**

Where to eat

Basecamp's **The Kennel** in Sønderdalen was originally a trapper's hut. Cuddle the friendly hounds and eat ob-sticking soups and stews in the log cabin's steamy warmth. **Huset**, built as a centre for the mining community, is the archipelago's cultural hub, with a cinema and theatre. Its restaurant attracts some of Norway's leading chefs. Thor Ingo Gabrielsen's menu is big on local ingredients, including reindeer, seal and Arctic char.

Prices

A five-night itinerary, with three days of dog sledding and two nights in Noorderlicht, costs from £1,700 a person full board, including guides and equipment, with **Stappes Travel** (01285 880961; www.stappes-travel.co.uk). A three-night snowmobile trip to Cape Line, with stops at Basecamp Trapper's Hotel and Basecamp Isfjord Radio, costs from £1,150 a person, including all activities and most meals, with **Basecamp Spitsbergen** (+47 79 02 46 00; www.basecampexplorer.com).

How to get there

SAS (www.flysas.co.uk) flies from London to Longyearbyen via Oslo and Tromsø, from £361 return. ☐