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£3 OCTOBER 2012

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the snow

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Are we there yet?

Pack your spirit of adventure and leave your phone at home; an Arctic snowmobile trip offers a real break and an unparalleled experience

BY DEBORAH BEE

The point of holidays is to holiday. Teenagers have an annoying habit of pointing this out when your mobile is buzzing next to the bread basket during a lunch by the Mediterranean. The point of a holiday, they say, is to stop working: no work-related texts, emails or calls. My children have created a sliding scale of fiscal punishments, with a phone call the most expensive, costing the local currency equivalent of £5. Generally, I just pay up. But here's some news for frustrated children of workaholic parents – in the Arctic, there is no signal.

Does a holiday in the Arctic sound like an oxymoron? True, it's not your average week of sun, sea and sand. But another of the many annoying habits of teenagers is that not much impresses them. The view overlooking the Bay of Naples, or the turquoise of the Caribbean, wears thin after

ABOVE Svalbard's pristine landscape is a match for any turquoise-sea view

what, half an hour? So when I heard about a four-day snowmobile holiday in Svalbard, I thought, that'll wake them up. And indeed it did – to the point that their eyelashes froze to their eyelids. Hurling across glaciers at 60km/h in a blizzard is altogether more diverting, apparently, than even *Call of Duty*.

Svalbard is a group of islands north of mainland Norway. To reach them you must fly to Oslo and from there north to Tromsø – then, an hour or so later, you land at the world's most northerly runway, in Longyearbyen. It takes most of a day to get there, with time to while away in Oslo Airport, where you may discover that you can punt with £70 for three pizzas. At least you appreciate Pizza Express all the more.

Not much happens in Svalbard without a lot of help from electricity. Apart from reindeer, seals and polar bears mooching about, there was nothing at all going on here until 1596, when Dutch explorer and cartographer ►



Willem Barentsz discovered the islands during his attempt to navigate the Northeast Passage. When a Mr Longyear found coal in the area in 1906, a town grew up. Although the coal is now prohibitively expensive to export, it is still mined to fund things like the under-road and -pavement heating, and all the other little luxuries required to keep you from sliding into trouble.

Instead of mining, Longyearbyen now revolves around an impressively feted university – populated largely by young students on research secondments who, by all accounts, study cross-sections of glaciers to discover what was in the air way back when. There are a few stores, mostly selling thermal clothing and reconstituted beef-in-a-foil-bag, and some snowmobile-hire shops. There is also an incongruous restaurant and a couple of surprisingly plush hotels, one of which is ours: the Basecamp Trapper's Hotel. Built on stilts above the permafrost, the Trapper's Hotel is as perfectly romantic as a log cabin in the woods. Chunky log walls, fluffy blankets and crisp cotton sheets are not what you expect from a town where snowmobiles outnumber people.

On the evening of our arrival we are met by our Basecamp guides, who show us maps and instruct us on advanced navigation systems – the only way, apparently, to get from A to B in an ever-changing landscape. Although friendly and funny, they are a serious bunch; there is a no-messing-about lecture aimed at the teenagers and potential speed-freaks on the etiquette of snowmobile driving, what to do if you see a polar bear, and even how to get dressed. Seriously.

ABOVE Snowmobiles offer an exhilarating way to get from A to B

A holiday wardrobe has no glamorous overtones when visiting the Arctic. At 78 degrees north, no one is going to know – or care – whether your underwear matches, because it will be hidden beneath at least five layers of thermal wool, cashmere and wicking cotton. The next morning, following instructions, we each struggle to get into two pairs of long johns with trousers over the top, three pairs of socks, four thermal tops plus a big woolly sweater. On arrival at the Basecamp centre we are assessed; our sweaters are yanked down and our socks are counted. We are then furnished with the rest of our kit: a clumsy waterproof suit that's a complication of Velcro and zips; three pairs of gloves; a balaclava; a pashmina (OK, that's just me); a pair of army-style boots with tyre treads for soles; and a helmet. All set, we waddle like giant black Michelin Men down the slopes to the snowmobiles.

Our journey from Longyearbyen to Basecamp's coastal outpost, Isfjord Radio, takes us across the pristine landscape of Svalbard (Norwegian for "cold coast"), through valleys filled with glaciers and across frozen-solid lakes. From March to May, the conditions are judged just about clement enough to allow for fairly hardy tourists, by which I do not mean Everest-climbing adventurers, but people who are able to enter into a spirit of (cold) adventure. The days are light enough, the sun shines enough and the ground is frozen enough for the land and water to become one big snowmobile playground. Come June, the islands have to be navigated by boat; once winter hits, no one but a native



“The sky is blue, the sun is shining, the air is crisp and the ice is a twinkling, fairy-tale landscape”



would be fool enough to take on the snowdrifts in the permanent night-time.

Our company is made up of four teenagers and four parents, so four snowmobiles, together with two guides. We proceed in single file down the side of the Longyear dalen valley, flanked on either end by our guides carrying compulsory guns and beacons. We proceed gingerly at first, then gather speed once we all realise that if we lose the tail-lights of the snowmobile ahead, we will get lost – along with our companions behind us.

Every half hour or so, we slow to a halt, park side by side and dismount. The guides deliver a talk about walruses, mining, the history of the town, or the flora and fauna that may or may not be under the ice beneath our feet. They point, we look. And while it's fascinating and all, it's nowhere near as exhilarating as flying across a fjord at top speed. The sky is blue, the sun is shining, the air is crisp and the ice is a twinkling, fairy-tale landscape. If the Snow

Queen pitched up, it would hardly be surprising.

At lunchtime, we pull into a sheltered valley where dunes of snow create lilac shadows. The guides unload kettles and cutlery, and use boiling water to start reviving what was once a stew. I wouldn't put reconstituted sweet-and-sour chicken high on my list of recommended gourmet treats – then again, you don't come to the Arctic for the food.

By 4pm we have seen reindeer and seals, visited empty summer chalets and emergency winter retreats, and snowmobiled for six hours. Our visors have iced over, our fingers have all but dropped off, we have regretted not wearing more socks, and our bottoms have vibrated for long enough. The sight of the sea, and Basecamp's Isfjord Radio perched next to it, is heaven. Harps are playing.

The ladies at Isfjord have made us each a spicy orange drink, and they carry trays of steaming-hot cups down to where we park. I have no feeling at all in my hands, and my balaclava is stuck to my nose. But this is the nicest drink I have ever had. Ever.

Isfjord Radio's past is shrouded in a certain amount of mystery. Built in 1933 to help ships and air traffic with navigation, it was positioned at the top of the world to have an ear on an awful lot more than meets the eye. During the Second World War, no one really knows who was saying what to whom. Once satellite communications were established in 1979, the station became outdated – and what better way to breathe life

into a historic building than to turn it into a hotel?

The shell of Isfjord Radio – the layout of bedrooms and bathrooms, communal rooms and kitchens – has remained the same, with metal shutters and '50s styling commensurate with the period in which it was rebuilt after the war. That, however, is where the history ends. The bleak bunks that must have once filled the bedrooms have been replaced by squishy double beds dressed in sophisticated combinations of grey wool, cool cotton and cashmere throws. There are elegant sofas scattered with cushions and plate-glass windows overlooking the ocean. The bathrooms may be limited to one per four bedrooms, but they are clean, functional and all that you really need when you have spent the day alternating between extreme cold and adrenalin-pumped boiling. And following your inevitable face-down-in-the-pillow-I-can-never-walk-again power nap, Basecamp lays on a dinner of Norwegian specialities, including raw whale meat, raw reindeer, local fish and lentils. Delicious, if a little unusual. ►

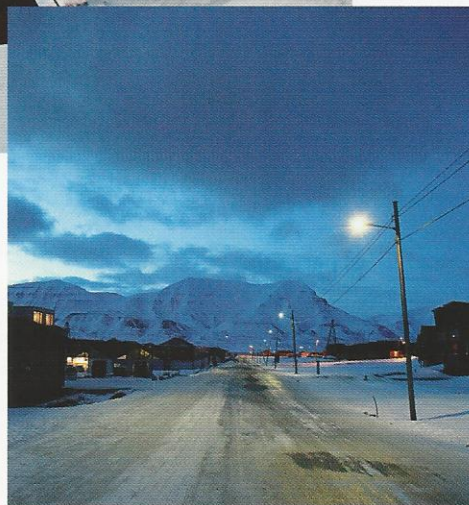
THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Reindeer room the ice of Svalbard; the Isfjord Radio hotel is elegantly furnished; an extensive but essential array of thermal clothing is provided; the cosy Trapper's Hotel comes complete with fluffy blankets on the beds



just about everything – only to discover that Longyearbyen holds one more surprise. The Huset restaurant is as posh as you like, with a roaring fire, remarkably decent wine and a glorious meal of sauerkraut and beef tenderloin, along with amuse-bouches and sorbets between courses. It's a standard of sophistication so incongruous, it must be driven by a considerable level of passion. The thought of trying to get a chilled bottle of Chablis past all those fjords and reindeer gives me brain freeze.

So is the Arctic a holiday for everyone? Possibly not. Mums-(imminently)-to-be are not encouraged, as no babies are allowed to be born on Svalbard. No one ill is permitted either, as there are no facilities for hospital care. Young children and the not-so-hardy would find the cold uncomfortable. And if you don't like fish or reconstituted meat, you will find your diet is either exotic (Huset) or largely chocolate-based. However, for adults with a short attention span and teenagers who have seen everything, this is as memorable as a holiday can be. In all that expanse of nothing, there is no room for distractions, and without a mobile signal there is neither texting nor Facebook, which means – heavens above – you might even get a conversation out of them. ■

The Huset restaurant offers a standard of sophistication so incongruous, it must be driven by a considerable level of passion



After all that, it's time to head back to bed, exhausted.

The return journey to Longyearbyen the following day is all the more exhilarating for the blizzard. It's that much harder to hang on to the tail-lights of the snowmobile in front, and to the teenager driving my snowmobile – this is a white-knuckle ride, for real. Our route takes us to a Russian town that has only recently opened its doors to its Norwegian neighbours. The shop, bar and restaurant – all housed in the same repressively beige multi-storey building – sell only Russian goods: dolls, cigarettes, vodka and beetroot soup. The area's only work – coal mining – is evidenced by grey, boxy buildings connected by flimsy-looking conveyor belts, all now covered in snow. The theory goes that the Russians only stay so that they maintain a presence in Svalbard – if they left, they would lose any rights to being there. Watched from various windows, we head back to the Trapper's Hotel.

By the time we have washed and changed our clothes, and are ready for our evening meal, we feel like we have seen

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT At 78 degrees north, Svalbard is pretty far from just about everywhere; dog sledding is a popular activity; the small town of Longyearbyen holds some surprises in the form of plush hotels and an exceptional restaurant

PLANNING YOUR TRIP

- Take a four-day snowmobile journey to Isfjord Radio with Basecamp Spitsbergen (www.basecampspitsbergen.com; +47 7902 4600) from approximately £899 per person, including two nights at Basecamp Trapper's Hotel, one night at Isfjord Radio, all outdoor clothing and equipment, three breakfasts, two lunches and one three-course dinner. Based on two sharing. Half-day dog sledding from approximately £129. Flights and airport transfers not included. Single-room supplement applies.
- Trips run from March to May 2013.
- Return flights from London to Svalbard (via Oslo) with SAS (www.flysas.co.uk; 0871 226 7760) start at £345 including taxes.

For more information, visit www.visitnorway.co.uk