

COME ON IN, IT'S COLD OUTSIDE

It may not look much, but inside this Arctic radio station is a hotel offering cool design and a warm welcome.

By Stephen Bleach

The world's remotest boutique hotel doesn't get a lot of passing trade. To reach it, take a flight to Oslo. Then get another to the archipelago of Svalbard, way up in the high Arctic. Then, in temperatures of -20C, drive a snowmobile 60 miles across trackless mountains, frozen fjords and snowy wastes, carrying a high-calibre rifle. Finally, enter the hotel, where alluring attendants will ply you with smoked reindeer-heart crostini and a rather good Côtes du Rhône, while a man with a white cat sits on Gucci cushions and says: "Ah, Mr Bond. We've been expecting you."

OK, I made up the man and his cat, but everything else is real, down to the Gucci cushions. Isfjord Radio is, without doubt, the weirdest and, in many ways, the most gratifying place I have ever stayed. It's like finding Soho House has opened a branch at the North Pole.

It is, as the name suggests, an old radio station. From the 1930s to 2001, it was Svalbard's main link with the outside world. Then a fibreoptic cable was laid across the Arctic Ocean and the station was abandoned. It languished, semi-derelict, until a bright chap called Svein Wilhelmsen said: "Hey, why don't we make it a trendy hotel?" When it was pointed out that hotels need guests, and the nearest ones would be a day's hard journey away, he just shrugged and said: "We'd better make it very good, then."

He did. I'll tell you how shortly but, as you'll have gathered, with Isfjord Radio the getting there is half the experience.

In the islands' dinky little capital, Longyearbyen, you put on your polar thermal suit. They're bulbous and black and slightly military, so you look like a Teletubby who's been seconded to the SAS. Then you get on your snowmobile. You could go by dogsled, but don't. It's terribly authentic, but takes two long days each way (camping overnight), and, anyway, snowmobiles are an almost criminal amount of fun, especially driven up mountains at 50mph.

I set off with my guide, Ingeborg. I take an extra jumper and cigarettes (but no bathing suit, which turns out to be a mistake), while she tows a sled full of emergency equipment, and carries a whacking big gun. Everyone does out here. There are 3,000 polar bears roaming around.

The route takes us over high passes, through wide valleys and along rivers frozen into ribbons of crystal-clear ice. The sky is pure blue, the earth blinding white, the emptiness overwhelming. It's enough to make you come over all spiritual, which I certainly would have done if I hadn't been having such a good time chucking the snowmobile up and down gorges at speeds that were just slightly beyond my ability. The wilderness is supposed to put you in touch with your soul. It turns out I have the soul of Jeremy Clarkson.



After six thoroughly enjoyable hours, we gun the engines to the top of a final crest, and below us sits a huddle of utilitarian buildings surrounded by radio masts, all on the shore of the Arctic Ocean. It's the outer edge of nowhere.

Isfjord Radio was sited here because there's nothing to interfere with signals sent to Norway's North Cape, about 500 miles away. The antennae array, little dock crane, diesel tank and overground pipes make it look like a disused piece of industrial plant, which is exactly what it is. But hidden within is an interior

that could have come straight out of the pages of Elle Decoration.

In fact, it did — the magazine, and its fashion sister, Elle, have used Isfjord Radio for shoots. Norway's top designer, Halvor Bakke, has made this his pet project: the colour scheme is charcoal and white, the furnishings a mix of industrial chic (much of the old radio kit has been preserved) and natural materials from the frozen wastes outside (driftwood tables, pebble lamps). The effect is effortlessly cool, and stunning for its incongruity: laze on the designer cushions in the window alcove and you gaze out at a landscape that humans weren't meant to inhabit, let alone be comfy in. Just venturing outside without an Arctic suit could induce hypothermia within minutes. Which can mean only one thing: time for a swim.

No, there's no pool. You swim in the Arctic Ocean, which is a relatively balmy 2C. It's not compulsory, but they do give you a certificate for it, and I'm a sucker for a certificate. Without trunks, I tramped to the beach in jogging bottoms, a dressing gown, fleece hat and polar boots. Where's an Elle photographer when you need one? Ingeborg brought her gun, though whether to deal with polar bears or to put me out of my misery, I'm not sure.

The shingle was covered with a sheet of ice. I shrugged off my dressing gown, closed my eyes and marched into the water. It was an interesting sensation, not so much cold as abrasive, like getting a full-body rubdown with Swarfega. If you stay in for more than two minutes, you'll probably die, and my wife had issued stern instructions about this, so after 20 seconds I ran out, screaming. Conclusion: swimming in the Arctic



The snowmobile transfer to Isfjord Radio, above, is all part of the fun. Don't worry, it's a lot sexier inside



"She tows a sled full of emergency equipment and a whacking big gun. Everyone does out here"

Ocean is a profoundly stupid thing to do and I would advise you not to. The certificate's nice, though. Laminated and everything.

Aside from swimming for masochists, there are various outdoorsy things to do: hike the mountains, fuss over the huskies, check the fox traps, butcher seals (which was smelly but interesting — they'd just shot one for the pot), but by this time I'd realised they miss the point of Isfjord. Instead, I took my time over the chef Hans-Christian's dinner (his crema catalana with cloudberries is superb), then settled down by the fireplace in the rather groovy lounge, ordered another glass of the Benjamin Leroux burgundy, and stared. Outside the window, the most hostile environment on earth was doing its worst, yet here I was in my hip James Bond lair, warm, fed and slightly sozzled. It was splendid. All I needed was a white cat.

Stephen Bleach travelled as a guest of Basecamp Spitsbergen and SAS

Travel details: a four-day snowmobile journey to Isfjord Radio with Basecamp Spitsbergen (00 47 79 02 46 00, basecampspitsbergen.com) starts from £1,330pp driving the snowmobile (£936pp as a passenger), including two nights at Basecamp Trapper's Hotel and one night at Isfjord Radio, all outdoor clothing and equipment, three breakfasts and a three-course dinner. A half-day dogsledding costs from £109. Flights from Heathrow or Manchester to Svalbard, via Oslo, start from £360, with SAS (0871 226 7760, flysas.com). Taber Holidays (01274 875199, taberholidays.co.uk) has five nights as above (travelling as a snowmobile passenger) from £2,953pp, including some meals, and flights from London. Or try Abercrombie & Kent (0845 485 1553, abercrombiekent.co.uk).