



Arctic extremes

Barry Stone fights off a pod of walrus on his icebreaker expedition in the Russian High Arctic. But he remains sensibly wary of the resident polar bears in their natural habitat 900 kilometres from the North Pole.

Photography by Wolfgang Jaekel*.



I can truly say I'd never been so physically removed from the rest of life on earth as I was at that moment, strolling along the pebble-strewn shoreline of Cape Triest on Champ Island in the Russian High Arctic lost in my thoughts, all the while moving slowly away from the expedition group I'd been told not to stray from. But I've always been a wanderer. That's what brought me here.

It was our guide with the shotgun and cache of soft lead, bear-killing slugs that snapped me out of it. "Not so close to the shore, Barry!" he said. "Remember the bear lecture!" Oh yeah, the bear lecture. Oops.

Polar bears, I'd learned at our onboard lecture the night before and then promptly forgot, are mighty swimmers, with the longest ever recorded that of an adult female, 12 ½ days across 680 km of the Beaufort Sea. That very morning a bear was sighted on neighbouring Salisbury Island, forced onto dry land because the sea ice – its preferred habitat and the conveyor belt they ride in their unending search for food – was thin this year. It would be nothing for a bear to swim across the narrow channel separating Salisbury and Champ islands, wade ashore on the beach where I was day-dreaming and kill me. That was enough to stop me dead in my ice-cold tracks.

Champ Island lies at the heart of the 191-island archipelago of Franz Josef Land (FJL), two days sail north

of Murmansk on our icebreaker, m/v *Ortelius*. FJL is a fog-laden world, so far adrift from anything that could be considered civilised that it avoided detection by the world's explorers until 1873, in fact, almost the entire Age of Sail.

Vital stepping stone

Even after its discovery FJL was slow to surrender its secrets. Map-makers were confounded by the arrangement and multitude of islands, deceived by the occasional sameness of their topography and relative proximities to each other, then compounded it all by including additional islands that otherwise reputable navigators had sworn blind they'd seen but couldn't possibly have, like mythic *Petermann Land* and other figments of sailor's imaginings, pencilled in when fog banks were mistaken for land-hugging glaciers.

Once found, however, it lost no time in becoming a vital stepping stone for a generation of Nordic, Russian and British explorers all striving to be the first to reach the geographic North Pole, just 860 kilometres to my north. In June 1893 the great Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen sailed here in his ship the *Fram*, designed so it could be lifted up in FJL's annual mass of drifting sea ice then carried to the pole in the cold embrace of the arctic's Beaufort Gyre current. Nansen and his party didn't make it, but they didn't die either. They returned as heroes to Oslo and their epic struggle still ranks

as one of the more impressive accounts of human perseverance ever handed down and one of the enduring folk tales that Norwegian parents still tell their children when they put them to bed.

Arctic tale

Champ Island lies at 80.66 degrees latitude. It was the furthest north I'd ever been (well, as of Day 6 that is, Days 7, 8, 9 & 10 were still to come!) Latitudes are revered numbers here because they pinpoint one's proximity to the geographic North Pole which is a vital ingredient in any arctic tale, tall or true. I'd been up there for several days and, like the arctic gulls that follow icebreakers like *Ortelius*, feeding on algae on the overturned ice sheets we were ploughing through, I'd been habituated.

Geographically FJL appears to belong to Norway and most likely would have if, in the early 1900's, icebreakers existed to take them there. Russia, by contrast, had icebreakers to spare, and so claimed the archipelago for itself. Yet the question of ownership remains moot. There is nothing here, save for a couple of weather stations and a career-ending military outpost we never saw, to suggest it is owned by *anyone*. It is ambivalent to us. Kick over a rock here and it's the first time its position has been altered by something independent of Mother Nature, since, well, forever. And that is a grand thought.

Weather dictates everything here, from where you're able to sail, to what you're permitted to do when you get there. Warmer than expected currents saw us in ice-free channels where sea ice was expected. This allowed us to head along rarely navigable waterways in search of sea ice and the polar bears that inhabit it. Polar bears are guaranteed here – and find them we did. The official count, including cubs, was 21.

Pod of walrus

Ortelius was expedition cruising at its improvisational best. For two days we sailed without ice charts courtesy of a crippled internet connection. When a

pod of walrus surrounded our rubber Zodiacs near Jackson Island, we had to beat our hulls with paddles to keep them from boarding! After a midnight landing on the Eurasian Continent's northernmost speck of land – Cape Fligely on Rudolph Island – an experience worthy of a story all of its own, a Zodiac that was trailing us back to *Ortelius* became lost in fog for 20 minutes, unable to locate the ship. Some people have all the luck.

Now it goes without saying this isn't an easy place to visit – its sheer remoteness and layers of Russian bureaucracy see to that. More people have stood on the summit of Everest than have trod these bear and walrus-encrusted shorelines. But don't let all that deter you, rather, let it be the reason you come here.

No one appreciates the uniqueness and magic of FJL better than Norwegians. Tell one you're going to or have been there, and you're guaranteed their undivided attention. They've grown up on its stories. Take a young doctor I met, Helene. She was so impressed she took me cloudberry picking in a spongy Norwegian bog, cooked me a yummy meal of King Crabs, and made certain I connected with the right bus on to Santa's Workshop in Finnish Lapland (a deflating story that one – his elves are obsessed with *iPhones*! Is it possible he isn't who he says he is?)

I mention all of this simply because of an analogy Helene used which captures the essence of FJL better than any words this writer could ever conjure. In gratitude for her kindnesses I plumbed the depths of my backpack for the only things of value I had with me – some rocks I'd fossicked on Jackson Island, and gave them to her with an almost apologetic air. "Ohhh, these are wonderful", she said, as she turned them over and over again in her hand. "It's ... ohhh, I don't know ... it's like being given rocks from the surface of the moon". ●



Getting there: Scoot Airlines to Singapore, www.flyscoot.com then FINNAIR to Helsinki and on to Oslo, www.finnair.com/au; 50 Degrees North, www.fiftydegreesnorth.com.au



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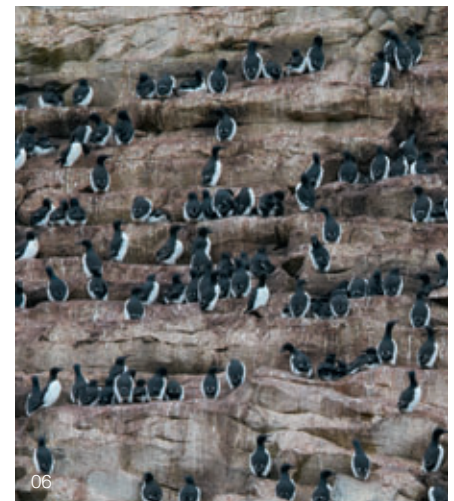
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*All photos excluding image 01 by Wolfgang Jaekel.

02 Polar bears in their natural habitat in the Arctic

03 Birdlife is prolific in Franz Josef Land

04 M/V Ortelius is perfect for expedition cruising

05 Don't get too close to the walrus

06 Thousands of guillemots nest on the rock faces