



World's Leading Polar
Expedition Operator

Spitsbergen Adventures

4th July – 13th July, 2012

On board the ***M/V Plancius***



MV *Plancius* is named after the Dutch astronomer, cartographer, geologist and vicar Petrus Plancius (1552-1622). *Plancius* was built in 1976 as an oceanographic research vessel for the Royal Dutch Navy and was named *Hr. Ms. Tydeman*. The ship sailed for the Royal Dutch Navy until June 2004 when she was purchased by Oceanwide Expeditions and completely refitted in 2007, being converted into a 114-passenger expedition vessel. *Plancius* is 89m (267 feet) long, 14.5m (43 feet) wide and has a maximum draft of 5m, with an Ice Strength rating of 1D, top speed of 12 knots and three diesel engines generating 1230hp each.

With Captain Evgeny Levakov,
his International Crew of 35

AND

Expedition Leader – Delphine Aurès (France)

Assistant Expedition Leader – Jim Mayer (Britain)

Guide & Lecturer – JJ Apestegui (Costa Rica)

Guide & Lecturer – Mick Brown (Ireland)

Guide & Lecturer – Michelle van Dijk (The Netherlands)

Guide & Lecturer – Christophe Gouraud (France)

Guide & Lecturer – Shoshanah Jacobs (Canada)

Guide & Lecturer – Raphaël Sané (France)

Dive Master – Kelvin Murray (Scotland)

Dive Guide – Erin McFadden (Scotland)

Dive Guide – Jerry Sutton (Britain)

Hotel Manager – Alan Hogan (Canada)

Chief Steward – Marck Warmenhoven (The Netherlands)

Head Chef – Ralf Barthel (Germany)

Assistant Chef – Mathias Schmitt (Germany)

Ship's Physician – Tijmen Buddingh (The Netherlands)

Day 1: 4th July 2012

Embarkation: Longyearbyen, Spitsbergen

GPS 16.00 Position: 78° 13.9'N, 015° 38.7'E

Weather: Light wind, warm and sunny.

Our adventure began as we climbed up the gangway from the pier in Longyearbyen. We embarked on *Plancius*, our comfortable floating home for the next nine days. The weather was so warm that Kelvin and Jim even had their shorts on!

Since Longyearbyen's foundation as a coal mining settlement in 1906 by John



Munro Longyear, it has been the start point for many historic and pioneering expeditions. As we cruised into the Isfjord we spotted several fulmars, black guillemots and terns.

We gathered together in the lounge for briefings and introductions. The lifeboat drill provided an opportunity for dressing up and getting to know each other as we huddled together like orange-breasted sea birds on the deck, peering into lifeboats.

The evening continued in safety with champagne and high hopes for a successful voyage. Expedition Leader Delphine Aurès proposed a toast to our expedition aboard *Plancius*.

After our first dinner on board, there was still plenty of daylight. Some retired to the bar or strolled on deck while others headed to their cabins to catch up on sleep, in preparation for our adventures ahead!

Day 2 – 5th July 2012

14th July Bukta, Blomstrandhalvøya & Ny Ålesund

GPS 10.00 Position: 79°07.7'N 011°49.1E

Weather: Light air and overcast but mild – temperature high of 13°C.



The first full day aboard Plancius was a busy one. The first half of the morning was spent going through a few briefings including the polar bear and dive briefings. But, having anchored close to the imposing body of ice that is the 14th Julybukta Glacier – the zodiacs were soon launched so that the more adventurous side of the voyage could begin.

As the zodiacs moved toward the stately front of the glacier we passed cliff edges peppered with Black guillemots. Atlantic puffins stood out amongst the Guillemots – their colourful beaks and quirky movements are inimitable. Reindeer, Barnacle geese, Snow buntings and Glaucous gulls were also spotted here. Kittiwakes and Fulmars could be seen cruising around the high mountain tops. The nutrients contained in the guano produced by these birds have helped to create a mountain side that is rich in green vegetation.



The water here appeared to be milky. This was due to the sediments contained within the glacier becoming suspended in the water as the glacier melts. At times you could hear the deep grumbles of the glacier as it made its way further down the mountain. The large mounds of dark grey sediment piled on the opposite side of shore are evidence of the destructive force of the glacier. These mounds are composed entirely of sediments that the glacier has eroded and abraded over thousands of years.

The day certainly didn't stop there. After lunch the next stop was Blomstrandhalvøya where we took in what remains of the old marble mining industry established back in 1910 by Ernest Mansfield. Unfortunately for him and his company, the Northern Exploration Company, this venture was never a great success due to the poor quality of the marble – it cracked easily in the extreme cold.



Whilst others were walking ashore, the divers made their check-out dive – a chance to ensure their equipment and comfort level in the water is up to scratch. Diving here isn't for the faint hearted and it is crucial that our divers know themselves and can show us that they are ready and competent to dive in the Arctic.

Following on from the landing at Blomstrandhalvøya and the check-out dive the anchor was lifted. We moved the short distance across the water to the opposite shore where we would make another landing at the small settlement of Ny Ålesund.



Ny Ålesund has been an international research village since the 1960s. Scientific stations from a number of countries are found scattered throughout this small town the population of which is mainly comprised of scientists and researchers. While ashore people took the opportunity to send postcards from the world's most northerly post office and to stock up on souvenirs from the shop.

Day 3 – 6th July 2012

Woodfjorden to Monacobreen & beyond

GPS 08.00 Position: 79°36.9'N, 014°10.8'E

Weather: Sunny and calm, but clouding over and with increasing wind.

This morning we woke to flat calm conditions in Woodfjorden, so named because of the amount of drift wood that can be found strewn along the shores here. The sea, being the colour of chocolate milk, quashed any thoughts of diving, so all activities were land based. Zodiacs swarmed to the beach, dispatching groups of nature lovers into the surrounding beaches and hillsides for a few hours of exploration.



The broken slopes here produce ideal conditions for a variety of indigenous plants including Arctic bell heather, Mountain avens, Yellow & White Whitlow grass, Purple & Drooping saxifrage and Woolly lousewort.

Closer to the beaches, well camouflaged Purple sand pipers flitted around, their plaintive calling echoing across the tundra as Ivory gulls passed overhead.

The Red throated diver was briefly heard, but soon drowned out by the calls of homo sapiens making use of the snow for a quick descent!



A lively Minke whale put on a show over lunch as *Plancius* sailed on towards the Andøyan islands and cloudy weather. Here, as the zodiacs were launched, winds in excess of 25 knots whipped up the seas as the skies blackened. 'Safety first' and, with some effort in the increasing swell of the waves, the zodiacs were recovered before the ship headed towards finer weather.

Mick gave a great overview of the birds of Svalbard in a lecture before our arrival at Monacobreen.



Here the ship crept through uncharted waters and dodged sculpted bergs as spectacular views of the surrounding glaciers & mountains presented themselves through the broken clouds.

The day was ended on a historical note as Jim told the story of Christiane Ritter, one of the first women to live as a trapper on Spitsbergen. She overwintered in 1933-34, with her husband and one other trapper. Christiane's book, *A Woman in the Polar Night*, is published in English and German. We passed the Ritter residence at Gråhukken as we sailed Northwards.



Day 4 – 7th July 2012.

Phippsøya on the Sjuøyane archipelago.

GPS 08.00 Position: 80° 40.35'N, 020° 75.77'E

Weather: Foggy followed by clear and partly cloudy skies. Afternoon overcast.

This morning's destination was the island of Phippsøya, part of the archipelago known as the Sjuøyane (Norwegian for "Seven Islands"). The morning started with a scouting party going ashore, as usual, in order to secure the landing area before we began shuttling passengers.

The report came back that there were no bears within sight. There were the usual hikes planned for the morning. The idea was to go for a short walk across the saddle in order to look at a group of Walrus that were hauled out on the beach. We then split into several groups hiking to different destinations. The divers went for a dip near the point separating the two bays.

Once we got to the other side of the saddle, we formed a thin line, with a guide on each end, and walked slowly abreast the edge of the beach towards the slumbering

walrus, which looked like so many sacs of blubber, except these had some nice long ivory tusks. This technique, if well used, allows us to get within the acceptable distance to the walrus without stressing them unnecessarily. There was a group of about half a dozen males laying on the beach, and a couple of animals moving slowly among the ice that had accumulated in the bay, brought there by the winds of the last couple of days.

While one group visited the Walrus the others walked slowly along looking at the lichen-covered rocks or at the birds in an icy pond just beyond the landing beach, including Arctic terns, the ever-present Eider ducks, and Parasitic jaegers (Arctic skuas).



In the meantime, as the morning progressed, the fog disappeared and it became a sunny day, with patches of blue sky, and some groups went hiking for longer, while others just rambled about covering a small distance but poking around at anything of interest.

The morning landing ended just after mid-day and the *Plancius* heaved anchor and made her way into northern waters. During the afternoon, Raphaël gave a lecture

on the different types of ice while the *Plancius* sailed north looking for the edge of the polar pack ice. Soon word came over the PA system that we had made it there.

We all went out to the open decks, as the ship slowly approached and made her way along, breaking through the thin layer of summer sea ice while the naturalists and many eager passengers looked along the floes in hopes of spotting wildlife, especially of the four-legged kind. In the meantime, Ivory gulls flew around us, curiously checking out the ship.

Where the relatively “warmer” water from the Gull Stream meets the cold ice edge, the little humidity present in the atmosphere condenses, creating fog. The ship broke through the pack ice leaving a trail of open water that would soon enough would close up behind us.

Around 1900, the announcement was made that we had reached our furthest north for the journey, at 81° 27' North, and we all gathered on the open deck behind the bridge for a toast to the Captain and to the fine weather, which had made this achievement possible.



Day 5 – 8th July 2012

Alkefjellet & Torellneset

GPS 08.00 Position: 79°52.5'N 017°52.6'E

Weather: Cloudy with a cold north easterly wind & showers of sleet!



At 7.45 Delphine woke us up and welcomed us to another beautiful day in the Arctic.

After a delicious breakfast with Brussels waffles it was Shoshanah's turn to tell about Brännich's guillemots. What at first sight looked like an Arctic penguin, showed to be a very special creature with its own place in Shoshanah's heart.

By half past ten we were ready to take a look ourselves and with zodiacs we made a cruise along the bird cliffs at Alkefjellet. Thousands of Brännich's guillemots were flying around or sitting on an egg at the edge of the cliffs. Very impressive to see, hear and smell. As we knew from Shoshanah's talk, they don't build a nest, so there is nothing to keep the egg from falling. Just the shape of the egg. Sometimes when an egg rolls off the female has to lay another egg. This takes a lot of energy.

Our dive team brought up an egg from below the surface for us to have a look at: it was then returned to the deep.

It takes about 32 days to incubate the egg, and the chick will stay 21 days at the cliff. Then it jumps down and the father will follow it until it can fly. But falling off is not the only danger that needs to be survived. There are Glaucous gulls and Arctic foxes that want to feed their own babies too.

After lunch JJ gave us an introduction to marine mammals. He told us that the word walrus comes from the old Norse 'Ross Hval' which means 'horse whale'.

In the meantime the ship had sailed to Torellneset, a place that is known for Polar bears and Walrus. After the area was scanned, no Polar bears were found so we could get a look at the Walrus! They were very cooperative, performing a complete show. But of course after spending the morning in the zodiacs, we had to stretch our legs and the long hike almost made it to the Vestfonna glacier.

Back on *Plancius* pork & veal were served and Delphine announced a surprise for around 21h.



She had asked the Captain to sail along Bråsvellbreen, a part of Austfonna, Europe's second largest icecap. The total length of the ice cliff is nearly 190 Km which makes it the longest glacier front in the northern hemisphere!

Looking back, it was a cold but intense and impressive day.

Day 6 – 9th July 2012

Freemansundet

GPS 08.00 Position: 78° 30'N, 022° 50'E

Weather: Overcast, with increasing North Easterly winds gusting to 30 knots!

Throughout the night we sailed southward and occasionally the sound of ice scraping along the hull could be heard. At 06.00 we entered the remains of the winter pack ice in Freemansundet. Soon afterwards we had our first bear 300 meters ahead of the ship. The young male bear was curious but nervous too and

although he wanted to check us out, he kept moving away so we left him to his foraging.



We continued westwards along the sound between Barentsøya and Edgeøya moving through the one meter thick ice with ease. More bears appeared on the ice, each one moving in search of seals. A mother with her first year cub was also spotted on the ice. The cub really wanted to play with the ship but it's protective mum kept calling it away and they then moved onto the land.

The plan was to move across to Barentsøya and go ashore to hike and visit a Kittiwake gull colony. This soon changed when we saw two more bears on shore. By lunchtime we had a total of eight bears. We watched as the latest one slowly stalked a Harp seal before rushing at it, ending in a spectacular but unsuccessful leap. Throughout lunch we maintained the same position, as did the bear; but bears can remain in the same position awaiting their prey for hours and hours, and we had a schedule to keep if we wanted to make it around the islands.

Plancius repositioned and were all set for a landing at Sundneset. A zodiac was prepared and so was the wind. It blasted across the sound and preventing any attempt to launch the scout boat. If the operation had gone ahead we would no doubt have been stranded on shore for many hours! Instead of landing it was

decided to have an afternoon of lectures on board. Michelle told us all about the ways in which Arctic plants have adapted to the harsh conditions imposed by the Arctic climate.

This was followed by Delphine whose talk covered the Polar bear, its evolution, adaptation and the challenges it now faces if it is to survive in this rapidly changing environment. Recap was followed by an indoor BBQ in the gaily decorated dining room with music and excellent food prepared by the ever cheerful galley and dining room staff.

A total of 11 bears were sighted today and this was a record for all of the expedition staff in any one day!



Day 7 – 10th July 2012

Sundneset & Dolerittneset

GPS 08.50 Position: 78°11.09'N 021°02.5'E

Weather: overcast, north-easterly wind.

The day started at 7:15 with Delphine's morning call. As usual the restaurant opened 15 minutes later for the breakfast. As soon as we finished our cup of tea or coffee, two polar bears were sighted ashore. They had a rest in the tundra not far from our scheduled landing site, which make the disembarkation something a little bit tricky! Moreover, the wind speed began to increase, rendering things even worse. Hence Delphine' decision to move the ship "just around the corner", to the other side of the Sundneset peninsula. After a short navigation, we were able to anchor in a more sheltered place and to set up an acceptable distance between us and the bears.



Around 9:00, a zodiac with four guides left the ship to the western part of Sundneset on Barentsøya. After having thoroughly checked the landing area from various vantage points, they gave to Delphine the green light to proceed to disembarkation. Once ashore, we had the opportunity to have a little walk in the

tundra toward a hut –called “Würzburger Hütte”–, which was used by German scientists between 1959 and 1967 (they studied geomorphology). Many bird species were wandering around: Pink-footed geese and Barnacle geese on a small pond, Long-tailed ducks and Common eiders at sea, Snow bunting and Purple sandpiper in the tundra, etc. Our neighbours the polar bears remained

slumbering throughout the time we spent ashore.

Then we came back onboard the *Plancius*, ready for a well-deserved lunch. Meanwhile, the ship started to head for Kapp Lee on Edgeøya. By 15:00, we were able to have our second landing of the day at Dolerittneset, 5km south of Kapp Lee. Here lies a small bay that has some protection against swell, perfect for zodiac operations. The landscape is a mixture of many representative Svalbard features, such as elevated plateau, steep cliffs, gentle slopes, nice tundra (with reindeer peacefully grazing on it), small ponds, etc.

This place is also well known for its historical value, as Jim told us on the field. It hosts the foundations of a hut, and brick fragments that indicated it had been used by for Pomors (people coming from the White Sea region of Russia). The Pomor ovens were made up with brick, whereas Scandinavian trappers metal ovens. Further north is a walrus graveyard, that is to say a field of bones and skulls (without the tusks of course) coming from animals that were slaughtered for oil, ivory and leather.

We spent a delightful couple of hours in this nice place before returning onboard the vessel.

19:00: recap' time! Jim explained us the difference between 'Svalbard' (the name of the archipelago) and 'Spitsbergen' (the name of the main island), pointing out that the term 'Svalbard' is a recent invention. Then Michelle took over with the spectacular movie made at Ny Ålesund by a friend of hers showing a successful polar bear attack upon a seal. Then came Raphaël, with an incredible story about the descent of the Barnacle geese chicks, which have not yet learnt to fly, from the steep cliff were they hatched. And finally, Mick concluded with a funny story about the fate of hypothetical cruise ship passengers from different nationalities (generally a women and two men...) marooned on a remote island!

Day 8 – 11th July 2012

Gåshamna and Bugerbukta

GPS 08.00 Position: 76°55.6'N 015°49.9'E

Weather: Calm, cloudy, 3°C at breakfast and warming up.

This morning we awoke to still conditions! Another perfect day here in the far north. Breakfast was quick as already the anchor had begun to sound as it was lowered into the depths. We anchored off of Gåshamna, a popular landing site for trappers, whalers, and scientists throughout the ages. One good site is good for all!

Some of us went for a long, fast and difficult walk up the slope to get a better view of the fjord while others meandered along the beach identifying whale bones and the remains of huts. A nesting pair of skuas kept an eye on us irrespective of our activities, and the Snow buntings could be heard by all. We learned about whaling and the history of scientific research and we imagined what it would have been like to live here, right here, on this very beach.



Back on board the ship repositioned to Brepollen, just across the way, into a region with beautiful glaciers and many small icebergs. What a treat it was to explore this area from the comfort of the ship as we poked our bow into these fjords.

Michelle told the story of the whaling life here in Svalbard and filled us with interesting facts from both the whalers' and the hunters' point of view. Indeed things were busier back then and life was certainly more difficult.

Then it was time to get a better view of the glaciers and we all piled into our zodiacs and were whisked away in search of ice in Bugerbukta! We found all sorts of pieces of all shapes and sizes floating in front of the glacier and we even witnessed the creation of new icebergs with a large calving that occurred nearby! The birds were bathing throughout the bay and a lonely bearded seal rested quietly upon an ice floe. Surely there could not have been a better way to round off a day... except for, perhaps, the delicious hot chocolate with warming rum that Hotel manager Alan and Bartender Rosi served up upon our return!

Day 9 – 12th July 2012

Bellsund

GPS 08.00 Position: 77°43.2'N, 014°19.4'E

Weather: A little overcast but calm seas, 7°C



A calm morning allowed us to land on the north side of Bellsund for a little bit of birding and a little bit of history. The birds we stalked were the Little auks. These birds nest in colonies inside the crevices of the rocky slope of Ingeborgfjellet. These small birds are currently facing a challenge as the seas where they find food are warming up. The increase in temperature has changed the distribution of copepods, the shrimp-like creatures on which they feed.

The Little auks were visible standing on the rocks close to their nest until another polar resident arrived: the Arctic fox. The fox preys on birds such as the auks; naturally they became

nervous and withdrew. But we were able to observe the bushy-tailed hunter. In addition, there were many Svalbard reindeer to be seen many were happy to come close as we sat still.

Near-by are several cabins built by an English company, the NEC, between 1910-1920. This is the same ill-fated organisation that attempted to quarry marble in Ny London. They had no more success in their quest for gold and coal here, but the cabins are in good order and are regularly used by the population from near-by Longyearbyen for recreation.



Our afternoon landing gave us a chance to enjoy for the last time the feel and smell of a tundra landscape. It is the peak of summer and the flowers at Midterhuken were in full bloom; a small flock of King eiders fly past as we returned to the ship. A perfect finale to the voyage!

Plancius heaved anchor for one last time and turned her bows to the north. It was only a short voyage to Isfjord and Longyearbyen, and a short night's sleep for many. We said our goodbyes in the sunshine in the middle of the night as passengers left for the 4am flight home.

On this voyage:

**the Galley team have cracked 1620 eggs,
the engineers have made 198 tonnes of fresh water,
you have taken as many photos as there are birds at Alkefjellet
and we have sailed 1139 nautical miles!**

* * *

**Captain Levakov, Expedition Leader Delphine and the
whole expedition team thank you for sailing with us and
wish you bon voyage!**

