



OCEANWIDE

EXPEDITIONS

Spitsbergen Polar Bear Special

29th June – 6th July 2018

M/V Plancius



MV *Plancius* was 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 89 m (267 feet) long, 14.5 m (43 feet) wide, and has a maximum draft of 5 m. She has an Ice Strength rating of 1D, a top speed of 12+ knots, and three diesel engines each generating 1230 horsepower.



Captain Evgeny Levakov

and his international crew

Including:

Chief Officer:	Artur Iakoviev	[Russia]
2nd Officer:	Romanas Vicas	[Lithuania]
3rd Officer:	Luis Oroceo	[Phillipines]
Chief Engineer:	Teunis van't Verlaat	[Netherlands]
Hotel Manager:	Dejan Nikolic	[Serbia]
Assist. Hotel Manager:	Gabor Ferencz	[Hungary]
Head Chef:	Khabir Moraes	[India]
Sous Chef:	Ivan Yuriychuk	[Ukraine]
Ship's Physician:	Tanya Bayer	[Germany]
Expedition Leader:	Beau Pruneau	[Canada]
Assist. Expedition Leader:	Katja Riedel	[New Zealand]
Expedition Guide:	Michelle van Dijk	[Spitsbergen]
Expedition Guide:	Tom van Hoof	[Netherlands]
Expedition Guide:	Laurence Dyke	[UK]
Expedition Guide:	Adam Turner	[UK]
Expedition Guide:	Ben Frederiks	[Netherlands]
Expedition Guide:	Anke Timmerberg	[Germany]

Day 1 – Friday 29th June 2018

Embarkation: Longyearbyen

GPS 08.00 Position: 078°14'N / 015°35'E

Wind: SE 3. **Sea State:** Smooth. **Weather:** Overcast. **Air Temp:** +7°C. **Sea Temp:** +6°C.

Longyearbyen, at 78° north, is one of the world's most northerly settlements. It was founded as a coal mining settlement but it has developed into a thriving town of around 2,000 residents who live and work here all year round. During the summer months this number swells with the arrival of thousands of visitors on cruise ships.

A few of us had arrived in Longyearbyen a day early and had the opportunity to explore the town and maybe to take a day trip into the surrounding areas. Many of us arrived just this afternoon, and we were met by Tanja and Tom at the airport. We had a few hours to visit and explore the town before making our way to the port to join our ship *Plancius*.



We made our way to the floating pontoon and we were met by Katja and Michelle, who helped us with our luggage and gave us a quick introduction to travelling by Zodiac and a demonstration of how to put on the lifejackets. It was just a short boat ride into Adventfjorden to meet *Plancius*, which was lying at anchor out in the bay. It was an easy ride to the ship and it allowed us to become familiar with the Zodiacs which will be taking us to and from the shore over the coming days.



From the gangway we were shown to Reception where DJ, our Hotel Manager and his assistant Gabor checked us in and we were shown to our cabins by the very welcoming hotel staff. We found our luggage waiting for us outside our rooms. We had some time to familiarise ourselves with our cabin before we were called to the Lounge for the mandatory safety briefing which was given by our 3rd Officer Luis Oroceo. This gave us all the information we needed about safety on board the ship and prepared us for the lifeboat drill that was to follow. We heard the abandon ship alarm and gathered at the muster station, the Lounge, wearing our big orange life jackets, the only time we hope

to be wearing them. After the roll call we were taken out to the lifeboats to see where they were located and how we would embark if required.

We then had a chance to explore the ship and to check out the many different viewing areas. Out on deck we found that the *Plancius* had quietly weighed anchor and was cruising out of Isfjord heading northwest, straight into the evening sun, for the start of our Arctic adventure.

We met in the Lounge once again and had a briefing from our Hotel Manager, DJ who explained some of the procedures on board *Plancius*, our home for the week. The hotel staff served us champagne and canapes before we met with our Captain Evgeny Levakov who explained a little bit about our forthcoming trip.

We then had a chance to meet our Expedition Team who will be guiding us during our voyage here on Svalbard. We have an international team on board with a wealth of experience both here in the Arctic and Antarctica. Our Expedition Leader, Beau Pruneau, gave us an outline of our plans for the coming days. The first destination was to be Raudfjord, in the far northwest corner of Svalbard.

It was then time for dinner, and a chance to meet with our fellow passengers. With 24 hours of daylight many of us enjoyed some time out on deck with some sunshine and a brisk Arctic breeze, we spotted Fulmars, Guillemots, and Kittiwakes. It was a very pleasant evening on board.



Day 2 – Saturday 30th June 2018

Hamiltonbukta and Alicehamna

GPS 08.00 Position: 079°49'N / 010°27'E

Wind: NW 3. **Sea State:** Slight. **Weather:** Overcast. **Air Temp:** +3°C. **Sea Temp:** +3°C.

Overnight we sailed North along the west-coast of Spitsbergen and we arrived at Hamiltonbukta in the morning, suitably refreshed and eager to explore the area. Before we could board the zodiacs for our first cruise we listened to a safety briefing about how to enter and exit a zodiac, what to do if we encounter a polar bear, and we also learnt about the AECO rules for preserving the Arctic wilderness. The Arctic welcomed us with beautiful sunshine and just a breath of wind for our first venture towards the shore. We headed into Hamiltonbukta on the zodiacs and sailed through the glacier ice taking in the impressive fjord cliffs along the way. As we approached the glacier we entered rafts of small icebergs, we could hear a sharp popping sound from the ice. This is caused by air-bubbles escaping from the glacier ice as it melts, the bubbles have been trapped and pressurised in the ice for many thousands of years. We could also see a great example of a small cirque glacier which occupied a deep basin that it has carved into the mountains. Next to this was the much larger calving front of Smithbreen, and a few of us witnessed small calving events as chunks of ice fell from the glacier. As we drew closer to the glacier we experienced a sudden brisk wind and it became pretty cold. This was a katabatic wind which is produced by the glacier itself. It forms as the air cools on top of the glacier, it becomes heavier and sinks, blowing down the glacier, and causing the chilly breeze we experienced. The bay in front of the glacier was surprisingly full of wildlife, we spotted some Black Guillemots, Brunnich's Guillemots, Common Eider, Kittiwakes, and some Glaucous Gulls.



After a hearty and well-deserved lunch we crossed the fjord to Alicehamna, a chance to set foot on dry land and to explore this remote northwest corner of Svalbard. Once ashore we set off on a hike over the tundra. The weather was still excellent, bright sunshine and very warm (for Svalbard!). We split into three hiking groups, one with a focus solely on hiking, and the others having a little more time to explore and to take photos. At the beach we found an old hunting hut built by Norwegians and close to this we also saw

the grave of a whaler from the 17th century. As we hiked up the hill away from the fjord we found some small but beautiful tundra plants including the Polar willow (*Salix polaris*) and Mountain Avens (*Dryas octopetala*), and we also spotted some land birds including Ptarmigan, Purple Sandpipers, and Snowbuntings. As we gained elevation we could clearly see the different rocks on both sides of the fjord, these are a really nice example of a geological fault zone. The west side of Raudfjord is made of very old metamorphic rocks from deep in the Earth's crust; these are more than a billion years old. A large geological fault occupies the centre of the fjord and this separates the old rocks on the west side from the much younger rocks on the east side (although these still around 400 million years old!). These rocks belong to the Devonian Old Red Group, a geological period when Svalbard was located much closer to the equator than today. The fjord takes its name from the prominent red Devonian sandstones; Raud means Red in Norwegian.



After an invigorating but tiring day outside we headed back to the ship for afternoon tea and cake in the lounge. This was followed by a brief recap of the day, Laurence talked about some of the glacial features we had seen earlier in the day and Beau gave us an overview of the plans for the coming day. The *Plancius* weighed anchor during dinner and cruised gently out of the fjord, treating us to the stunning mountainous scenery of Raudfjord through the panoramic restaurant windows.

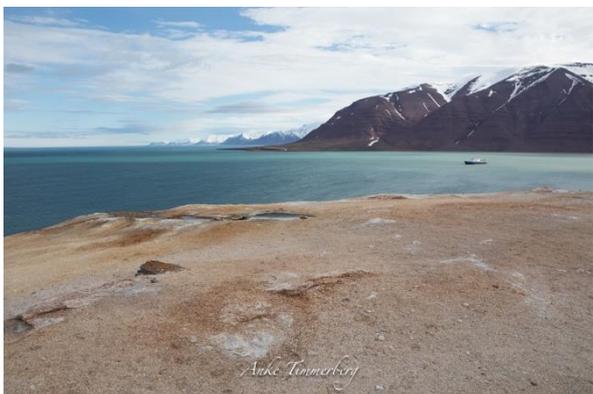
Day 3 – Sunday 1st July 2018

Bockfjorden (Jotun Quellen) and Monacobreen

GPS 08.00 Position: 79°32'N / 013°35'E

Wind: W 4. **Sea State:** Slight. **Weather:** Cloudy. **Air Temp:** +2°C. **Sea Temp:** 6°C.

Our day started with the now familiar wake-up call from Beau, our Expedition Leader, this was followed by a buffet breakfast in the restaurant. In the early morning we had entered Bockfjorden, a small arm of Woodfjorden in northern Spitsbergen, and the *Plancius* had dropped anchor off Jotun Quellen. On shore



the expedition team checked out the landing site and scouted for bears; making sure the area was safe to land. A short zodiac ride took us to the beach where we split in to our groups for the different hiking options. Michelle and Ben led the faster group high up the hillside, topping out on the summit of a large hill after just an hour. The medium group split in to two groups with Beau and Laurence with one part, and Tom and Anke leading another. The more leisurely group were led by Katja and Adam. All groups were able to enjoy the fantastic view across the fjord and to appreciate the smaller pieces of Arctic flora that were just

coming in to bloom. It was great to see these tiny flowers and their vibrant colours amongst the harsh conditions of the surrounding environment. Some of these plants are only found in this fjord on Svalbard; they are able to live here because of the unusual geothermal activity here.



All hiking groups were able to make the ascent to the location of the thermal springs. These are relatively small, but impressive nonetheless, in some places they can reach 24 degrees centigrade and they remain a source of open water even through the brutally-cold winter months. From the vantage point of the springs we were also able to see the dark conical shape of Sverrefjellet, a 500 m high volcano, and the youngest rock on the whole of Svalbard. This volcano erupted beneath an ice sheet during the last 200,000 years. This contrasts hugely with the rocks surrounding it, mostly marbles and dolomites, which are around 1 billion years old!

On our return to the ship we had a well-earned lunch and *Plancius* set sail for Liefdefjorden. After a couple of hours of stunning fjord views we arrived at the mighty Monacobreen, a vast glacier named after the Prince of Monaco who funded early expeditions around Svalbard onboard his yacht *Alice*. We then boarded the zodiacs for a cruise right up to the front of the glacier which gave us the chance to appreciate the size of the glaciers that are found here in Svalbard. It was also an opportunity to spot a variety of different wildlife, we saw Kittiwakes, Glaucous Gulls, Arctic Terns, Common Eider, and Northern Fulmars. We were also fortunate enough to see Bearded Seals hauled out on the icebergs in front of the glacier.



After an hour and a half of cruising in the tranquil fjord among the glaciers and icebergs we returned to the ship where Gabor met us with a much-needed drink at the gangway. During the evening recap Katja recounted her expedition during an Arctic winter where she had skied across the Bockfjorden, amongst the hot springs, and then across the mountains and over Isfjord to Longyearbyen. Tom also gave a short presentation about the unique geology of the area. This included the unusual volcanoes of Svalbard and he was also able to show us some fossils from the

sedimentary rocks in this part of Svalbard.

Day 4 – Monday 2nd July 2018

Bjørnsundet and Vibebukta

GPS 08.00 Position: 079°06'N / 019°59'E

Wind: NW 3. **Sea State:** Smooth. **Weather:** Overcast. **Air Temp:** +4°C. **Sea Temp:** +4°C.

We were woken, as usual, by the voice of Beau, we found ourselves in the middle of Bjørnsundet or Bear Sound, infamous for its numerous polar bear sightings. We enjoyed our breakfast while watching the rugged mountain peaks and glaciers through the restaurant windows. We hoped that today would be the day to see the king of the Arctic, the mighty polar bear. The expedition team had made up a schedule to ensure that at each minute of the day at least two guides were on the Bridge to see if there were any bears along the shore or on the ice floes that were passing by.

Right after breakfast the announcement came, the expedition team had spotted at least two bears walking in front of a glacier at over 6 miles distance! *Plancius* was steered towards the bears and the zodiacs were prepared in order to see the animals at a closer distance. It appeared that the closest bear was still at quite a distance from the edge of the fast ice that was gathered in front of the glacier. Luckily, we could drive the zodiacs right up to the edge of the solid ice; this proved to be a steady location from which to observe the bear. Or bears! When the bear started to walk along the pack ice, a smaller version appeared behind her back, it was a mother with a 6-month-old cub! After half an hour of cruising along the ice edge and watching the mother and cub on the ice another polar bear appeared with two slightly larger cubs! We found ourselves right on the edge of a polar bear kindergarten. The expedition team explained that there were still more bears sighted at the northern end of the glacier on the fast ice beneath the calving front. After an hour or so we counted a total of 7 bears, all on a pretty small patch of ice. It was an incredible experience to see bears in their natural habitat, interacting with each other, and even hunting seals right in front of us. Great!



Back onboard, the *Plancius* set course to Vibebukta, crossing the Hinlopen Strait. While underway we spotted several ice floes with walrus on the them. The groups of male animals were resting and enjoying the polar sun, they were completely unperturbed by our presence, perhaps because of the very quiet electric engines on *Plancius*.

After 3 hours of cruising we arrived at Vibebukta and near the edge of the Bråsvellbreen. We saw an armada of large icebergs that had broken off the enormous glacier front. As if cruising on *Plancius* wasn't enough, our expedition leader decided that we would go on a zodiac cruise too, passing a small stretch of the 200 km long Austfonna Ice Cap, the third largest body of ice in the world! It was a bright sunny day and once onboard the zodiacs we could feel the warm sun catching our faces. The glacier front appeared even more impressive from up close, we had a superb view of many beautiful waterfalls cascading over the ice cliff. These are formed by streams of glacier meltwater falling over the edge. On one iceberg a walrus was resting directly under the glacier cliff, a magnificent sight!



Once back on board we rounded off the day in fine style with a barbecue on the sunny back deck of the *Plancius*, it was tucked out of the wind and had the mighty glacier cliff as a backdrop. DJ played music into the evening and people were showing their best moves while doing the Macarena! What a day!

Day 5 – Tuesday 3rd June 2018

Palanderbukta and Alkefjellet

GPS 08.00 Position: 079°34'N / 020°53'E

Wind: NW 3/4. Sea State: Smooth. Weather: Clear. Air Temp: +5°C. Sea Temp: +2°C.

Overnight the *Plancius* had sailed into Palanderbukta to try and find some sea ice. This bay had some of the last sea ice in Svalbard here. We hoped to find wildlife here making the most of the very end of the Arctic spring. The expedition team were up early scouting from the bridge deck and Beau announced during breakfast that we had Polar bears in sight! The bears were on a large piece of fast ice and we could see them walking from a distance. Captain Levakov skilfully navigated the *Plancius* into the ice, clearing a small channel through the ice. As we got further into the ice it became clear that a lot of bears had chosen to live here for the last of the Spring conditions; we could see six bears including two mothers and three cubs. Some of the bears were quite far away, so-called "pixel bears". A few of the others were a little closer and we were able to see the bears patrolling the ice, through binoculars, telephoto lenses, and the big telescope on the bridge deck. Our time in Palanderbukta with the bears was made extra special by the glorious weather; blue skies, warm sunshine, and not a breath of wind. After almost an hour the bears wandered further into the fjord so we left them in peace and headed for a short landing a little further up the coast on the southern coast of Palanderbukta.



As we stepped ashore from the Zodiacs it became clear that we had entered the Polar desert of Eastern Svalbard. This area receives very little precipitation, less than 250 mm per year, and that showed in the extremely barren landscape. The few plants were extremely scarce and existed only in small areas where water was slightly more plentiful. We saw a small cabin by the beach at the landing site, this was built by the crew from the Norwegian whaling boat *Isfjord* as a base to hunt seals and fox from during the long Arctic winter. We took a stroll up over the flat shingle ridges to get a better vantage over the bay. The

ridges are raised beaches and are some of the best examples in the whole of Svalbard because they remain almost entirely unvegetated. We learnt that these raised beaches formed after the last glaciation when the land had been pushed down by the weight of the huge ice sheet which covered Svalbard. As the land slowly rose these beaches formed, these were then stranded high on land by the retreating sea resulting in the many terraces of beaches we can see today. On our way back down to the shore we encountered some whale bones, these are at least a few thousand years old and a really nice reminder that the sea covered this whole area not that long ago. We also had a chance to see an Arctic Fox on the beach, the fox was trying to hunt but was getting a very hard time from a couple of Arctic Terns which were dive-bombing it in an effort to chase it away from their nests.



In the afternoon we set off across the Hinlopen Strait towards the large island of Spitsbergen. We drew up alongside the spectacular cliffs of Alkefjellet and boarded zodiacs for a cruise in under the cliffs. The first thing we noticed as we got close was the noise; hundreds of thousands of birds make their home here and they were busy calling to each other in raucous fashion. As we got a little closer our nostrils were assaulted by the strong smell; the cliffs are covered in pungent guano. We cruised right up to the cliffs and were able to see thousands upon thousands of Brunnich's Guillemots, Glaucous Gulls, and Kittiwakes very close. Birds



cover every inch of horizontal space on the cliffs at Alkefjellet. We could also see flocks of Brunnich's Guillemots all around us on the water and even diving in the clear water beneath the zodiacs. A few of us also witnessed a small avalanche caused by a cornice of snow collapsing and cascading down a steep gully and into the sea.

After a lovely late-afternoon amongst the busy bird cliffs we made our way back to the ship for dinner. In the evening Adam gave a very entertaining lecture about a largely forgotten British polar explorer called Benjamin Leigh-Smith. We heard about his many important expeditions around Svalbard and Franz Josef Land and this included the exploits of "Bob", Leigh-Smith's loyal dog and a firm favourite of his expedition crew.

Day 6 – Wednesday 4th July 2018

Gråhuken and Fuglesangen

GPS 08.00 Position: 079°47'N / 014°21'E

Wind: N 1. **Sea State:** Calm. **Weather:** Clear. **Air Temp:** +11°C. **Sea Temp:** +2°C.



We woke to another glorious day in the Arctic. In the early hours of the morning the Expedition Team had been on the bridge scouting the low-lying islands that lie off the coast of Woodfjorden. They spent a lot of time staring a number of suspicious white dots far in the distance, but these turned out to be just rocks, bears were not to be found. Just after breakfast *Plancius* dropped anchor off Gråhuken, our landing site for the morning. We boarded the zodiacs, a now

familiar procedure, and within a few minutes we landed on the tranquil cobble beach on this wild northern coast of Spitsbergen. Just a few metres above the shoreline we saw the famous wooden Ritterhutte. In 1934–35 Hermann and Christiane Ritter wintered here in this tiny hut together with a young Norwegian hunter called Karl Nikolaisen. Christiane was the first woman to overwinter on Svalbard, and on her return she wrote an enthralling account of her time here called "A Woman in the Polar Night".

Gråhuken is positioned at the entrance of Woodfjorden and means the grey corner in Norwegian. However, as we walked out onto the vast tundra the weather was anything but grey, we had bright blue skies, strong sunshine, and the air temperature was a stunning 11 °C, pretty incredible for nearly 80°N! Woodfjorden is named after the huge amount of wood which washes up on the beaches in this area and we could see it all along the shoreline at Gråhuken. This driftwood is mostly complete tree trunks sourced from the Siberian boreal forests. The huge northwards flowing rivers of Arctic Russia are used by loggers to transport trees to the down to the coastal ports. Inevitably a lot of logs slip through the net and end up in the Arctic Ocean. These loose logs then spend up to five years circulating anti-clockwise in the Arctic Ocean, locked amongst the sea ice. They are finally released from the cold grip of the Arctic in the Fram Strait where the warm Atlantic current melts the sea ice.

On the tundra at Gråhuken we walked in our different groups, exploring the small patches of vegetation, marveling at the wild landscape, and keeping a look out for wildlife. We spotted breeding Arctic Skua, nesting Arctic Terns, and a few Purple Sandpipers. As we headed back to the ship a thick bank of fog rolled into the fjord from the north and the ship was soon invisible from shore; a reminder that the weather in the high Arctic is extremely unpredictable. We made it back to the ship slightly damp, a little chilly, but in plenty of time for another excellent buffet lunch. In the afternoon *Plancius* headed west, during the transit Michelle gave a lecture about Umberto Nobile and his adventurous expeditions with airships in the Arctic!



In the late-afternoon we arrived off Fuglesangen; a rugged island in the northwestern corner of Spitsbergen that is home to breeding colony of Little Auks. We landed on the beach and it was just a short walk to the colony. As we sat quietly among the boulders we were approached by many of the Little Auks who landed on the rocks around us. Little Auks are the smallest members of the Auk family and they treated us to displays of their cheeky behaviour. A few times they took off en-masse, swooping low over our heads. This is a response to the threat from Glaucous Gulls which

patrol the colony looking for unguarded chicks, eggs, or even the adult Little Auks themselves.

During the daily recap by Beau gave us details about the coming day, it would already be our last aboard the *Plancius*, time really flies up here! Katja followed with a presentation about Christine Ritter, and this included some choice excerpts from her book. Adam then wrapped up the recap with a presentation about whales (or was it Wales?!); he told us all about the Fin Whales we had seen earlier in the trip.



Day 7 – Thursday 5th July 2018

GPS 08.00 Position: 078°25'N / 011°55'E

Wind: SW 3. **Sea State:** Slight. **Weather:** Fog. **Air Temp:** +5°C. **Sea Temp:** +5°C.

The morning started a little earlier than usual with a wake-up call from Beau, this was to make the most of our last day. As we had breakfast and peered through the restaurant windows it became obvious that we were surrounded by thick fog, visibility was down to a few hundred metres at times. Unfortunately, this meant that our planned landing at Poolepynten had to be cancelled, there was not enough visibility to safely scout for Polar Bears and this is an area where they are frequently spotted. The expedition team set out in a scout boat to see how the conditions were at the beach and to see if the Walrus were home.

Fortunately, at this point the fog lifted a little and we could all board the zodiacs for a chance to visit the slumbering Walrus at one of their favourite haul-outs.

We were lucky enough to see a group of 20–30 Walrus, all adult males, adorned with huge tusks and weighing up to 1500 kg. Most were resting on shore, bunched up in an undulating pile of brown blubber and ivory. A few of the more inquisitive Walrus joined us on the water and they approached the zodiacs. We were treated to many displays as they snorted, scratched, splashed, and interacted with each other both ashore and in the water. It was especially impressive to see the big males square-up to each other as they negotiated for sleeping space on the beach!



We returned to the ship for lunch and had a short time to relax while the ship cruised into Isfjord. The fog thickened as we entered the fjord and we had sail past our planned landing spot at Alkhorneret. Instead we pushed further into the fjord, hoping for the better weather conditions that are often found in the inner-reaches. After an hour we suddenly emerged from the fog and into bright and clear conditions. We headed into Yoldiabukta and were able to cruise right up to the front of Wahlenbergreen. The glacier has recently surged and the calving front bore the scars from this acceleration, it was heavily crevassed and formed

pinnacles which towered over the *Plancius*. We also saw a flock of around 500 Kittiwakes feeding around the freshwater plume from the glacier, this very cold and fresh water stuns small fish and zooplankton in the surrounding sea and they float to the surface; a veritable sushi bar for the Kittiwakes!



After an hour in front of the glacier we reluctantly turned and headed back into Isfjord in the direction of civilisation. Beau held a final recap and gave us all the details we needed for luggage and our flights. After this we enjoyed a farewell cocktail with the Captain and Expedition Team as the ship steamed gently back towards Longyearbyen and the real world once more.



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EXPEDITIONS

Total distance sailed on our voyage:

Nautical miles: 925 nm

Kilometres: 1665 km



***On behalf of everyone on board
we thank you for travelling with us
and wish you a safe journey home.***