

78° NORTH BY YACHT

TWO YEARS AGO, ROB MCCULLOCH WAS LUCKY ENOUGH TO SAIL ROUND CAPE HORN, AND ST WAS LUCKY ENOUGH TO COVER HIS STORY IN OUR JUNE 2010 EDITION. THIS WHETTED HIS APPETITE FOR FURTHER EXTREME CHARTERING, AND SO HIS THOUGHTS TURNED TO THE SVALBARD ARCHIPELAGO.

PHOTOS: ROB MCCULLOCH

ROUTE MAP



Rob and Robert's journey through the ice.

quickly learned that Spitzbergen was considerably further north than Cape Horn is south. Spitsbergen is part of a huge archipelago called Svalbard and reaching 80 deg north is just about as far as anyone can sail without it being a highly specialised polar expedition. Very exciting and incredible to think that an ordinary, amateur sailor like me could even consider such an undertaking.

On further investigation, though, it turned out few yachts venture so far north, especially in late spring. However, French skipper Olivier Pitras was offering berths on his yacht Southern Star. He was bound from Tromsø to Longyearbyen on Spitsbergen with a brief stopover on Bjørnøya (Bear Island). A friend, Robert, agreed to join me and we bagged the last two berths on the voyage.

We aimed to leave Tromsø (north Norway) in late May which is really quite early for sailing as ice stretches from the pole as far as Svalbard in winter and only retreats under the relentless glare of the polar 24 hour summer sunlight. Providing the ice had cleared, we would be the first to explore some fjords since the previous brief summer gave way to the ice.



Main: Beautiful scenery and real adventure. Right: Rob and Robert.

AN INAUSPICIOUS START

We arrived in Tromsø to bitterly cold, severe gale force winds. The yacht was excellent, 75ft long with three oil fired heaters and a wide deck to work her in safety. Our two bunk cabin was at the stern and I was relieved that Olivier immediately offered an extra sleeping bag and blankets to add to my -10°C bag, which just wasn't up to the challenge.

Our first trip was from Tromsø, through the inner fjords north and east, to Lyngen, a spur of the mainland (P2). This was a cold motor sail and I was very grateful for the complete all round canopy that had been fitted to sail the North West Passage. She



Southern Star at rest pre-voyage.

has an extensive library of books on polar exploration and it was daunting to be on a yacht that is one of the first (of the still very few) that have sailed the Passage - particularly when reading of the many explorers who had paid such a high price in their attempts in the past.

Nevertheless, even in these sheltered waters it was a cold job to forsake the modest comfort of the canopy to scrape the sleet off the windscreen to see our way ahead and we were grateful to reach our destination of Lyngen.

THE BARENTS SEA

After a day the weather had moderated and we headed north beyond the shelter of the fjords into the Barents Sea. Shaking sleet off the warps before coiling them forced me to change my usual strategy. Normally I take gloves off to handle gear so they are dry when I want them, but in these conditions I reverted to a pair of thermal gloves under a pair of red builder's gloves from a DIY shop. I think they make an excellent combination as you can have spare thermals drying ready to rotate into use and the builders gloves are wind and waterproof at about £2 a pair.

Once clear of Arnøy and Fugløy we were out in the Barents Sea and settled into watches of three hours on and six off. As a volunteer on Tall Ships Youth Trust Challenger Yachts this is a real luxury and it was reassuring to know I had plenty of time

to thaw out and rest before the next watch. The crew consisted of Skipper (Olivier), Mate (Giles) and Cook (Tony) with nine of us making up the passage crew. Robert and I were teamed with Dominique who, thankfully, had a good grasp of English. Everyone but the two of us were French so by and large that was the language spoken. We have a smattering of French but I wouldn't recommend the trip to a single non-French-speaking sailor, as it could be quite lonely. The crew were competent sailors, all with either their own boats or plenty of sea time from other trips. I don't think it's the place for a first time sail.

We met a head wind and a quartering sea left over from the previous gales making an uncomfortable passage over the shallow Nordvest Banken as we cleared the North Cape of Norway, already beyond 70° N (P3). The wide, airy saloon had been excellent in harbour but now needed a sturdy rope strung

"I EXPERIMENTED WITH VARIOUS COMBINATIONS OF CLOTHES UNTIL I HAD ON ALL THE THERMALS I'D BROUGHT."



Robert with his 3am cod.



bay offering superb anchorage that is fully sheltered from the west. A long island called Makeholmen dominates a spur of islands running from the north closing the bay to swell from the NE making it the only place to be on this barren coast. Just further north the tallest mountain, Miseryfjellet Urd nears 2000ft giving an idea of the scale here, yet the rest of the island is a low plateau strewn with lakes.

Despite it being broad daylight at 3am we all went to bed except Robert who fancied a spot of fishing. We rose the following morning to the prospect of an excellent fresh cod dinner (note: fishing in the bay itself is not permitted).

SEA ICE

By late Saturday evening we were approaching Sorkapp an island to the south of Spitsbergen but the sea ice was far too dense. The Norwegian Met Office issue a daily ice chart and that is vital reading for anyone sailing in this region. We had known in advance where the ice would be and despite being driven west we were confident we would be able to

The ever-changing glacier.

turn north to run up the coast. Nevertheless, it was a great photo opportunity for those not on ice watch and I'm grateful to Françoise and Isobelle for their sharp photographs in such grey conditions. Wildlife thrives in these cold waters and we saw seals lazing on the floes whilst dolphins zipped underneath. Whales signalled their presence with blow spouts before rolling slowly over and flicking their tails in the air. After a while the ice became just more ice and the duty watch were abandoned as everyone off-watch sought warmth below.

The sea ice extended from the eastern coast, round the Southern tip of Spitsbergen and some way north leaving Hornsund completely icebound and inaccessible. We continued north up the West Coast of Spitsbergen past miles of snow-covered mountains of Wedel Yarlberg Land before Bellsund finally opened up clear of ice to the east of us.

Bellsund is the outer fjord leading to two huge fjords and is separated from inner Mijenfjorden by a narrow island of Akseloya. Fortunately there is passage round both ends with the north being much cleaner so we headed for a northern feeder fjord called Fridtjohamna where we anchored. Here I learned another navigational lesson. Looking at the actual ice wall where the glacier tumbled into the sea just didn't match the chart and disorientated me. But it's obvious when you think about it; the ice wall changes with the seasons amplified by the climatic changes over the years making for a highly mobile coast. Once that was clear in my head I could recognise the dramatic scenery with Ytterdalsgubben towering 3000ft to the west surrounded by a chain of more modest 2000ft peaks with equally unpronounceable names.



OLIVIER PITRAS

Skipper of "Cruise and Learn" trips since he was 19, Olivier left France about 25 years ago to sail the world. His combined passion for the sea, the mountains and virgin spaces soon led him to polar regions where he settled. He was the first French skipper to carry out the Arctic Ocean crossing (North West Passage) under sail in 1999. After spending some time in Patagonia, Tierra del Fuego, Alaska, Canada, Siberia and Greenland, he is now based in Tromsø in northern Norway. His never quenched passion for the North keeps him open and curious about the world which surrounds him, and gives him many opportunities to learn more each day from these so called 'hostile' areas which he chose as his favourite play-ground.

Olivier is author of the book "La voie des glaces" Editions Transboréal 2001, the film "La route du Pôle" with C. Neurisse, the documentaries; "Around North America", and "L'Allee des Glaces" with Frédéric Jouve (Kissthesa & Theorem / 2011), all well worth a look if your French is up to scratch.

SKIPPER

The huge scale of Svalbard (nearly a third the size of the UK), the mountainous nature of the terrain and the utter isolation struck home. The weather was moderating by the day with patches of blue sky and occasional sun but we were utterly alone. We had seen the occasional whaler or fishing boat at a distance but we were essentially on our own. The boat was a self-reliant microcosm and I was grateful for all the equipment and facilities she had - most aimed at survival and coping with the cold, wet conditions.

KITE FLYING

As we motored the last few miles to our anchorage Rob and I flew the camera kite he had brought. It's a very simple system to get aerial views of the boat and its surroundings. We're no experts and it was an opportunity to check the camera angle and trim. Being the only English on an otherwise totally French boat I think they thought we were nuts until we showed the video.

Once anchored we went to bed wasting hours of broad daylight to awake fresh next morning for a trek. The weather cleared to a perfect blue sky and bright sunshine as we trekked up a minor mountain so we could all experience uninterrupted views of a frozen land. Before setting off, our guide Olivier, prepped his pistol and rifle in readiness - the one to scare polar bears and the other to shoot them if they were not the 'scaring' type. We saw reindeer who were very curious about us and walrus who were totally indifferent to our presence but not a single sign of a polar bear.

After lunch our highly competent and laid back Mate, Giles manned the RIB and this time we trekked across the snow covered sea ice towards a colony of walrus. It was a bit unnerving to see the breaks in the ice and wonder how thick it was but other than pressure ridges it showed little sign of movement. Nearing the colony we came across polar bear prints, which we tracked for a while. They were huge, leaving the distinct impression that it wasn't the smartest thing to do so we continued

78°



The local walrus were barely aware of our presence.

to the walrus.

Early Tuesday we raised anchor and learned how muddy the seabed is here. Gerard and Annie did a great job scrubbing the anchor chain with ice cold water. We were bound for Isfjorden, which means ice fjord but why it stood out from all the other ice bound waterways is unclear to me. It lies half way up Spitsbergen and is the biggest fjord with many feeder glaciers offering a vast area to explore on land, sea and ice.

As Isfjord opened to the East we could see Prins Karl Forland, an off-lying island to the North West and the fjord headlands of Oscar II Land to the north and Nordenskiöld Land to the south. We were left in no doubt of the scale of the lands we were exploring. Svalbard is the name of the whole archipelago with the Island of Spitsbergen being about 200 miles long, very mountainous and 60% glacier - a stunning and challenging environment.

Our original plan was to anchor in Trugghamna on the North shore but this time it was too much kelp that changed our plans. After several attempts to set the anchor we

"WE WERE... POSSIBLY THE MOST NORTHERLY ACTIVE SAILING YACHT IN THE WORLD."



A great vantage point for spotting ice leads.

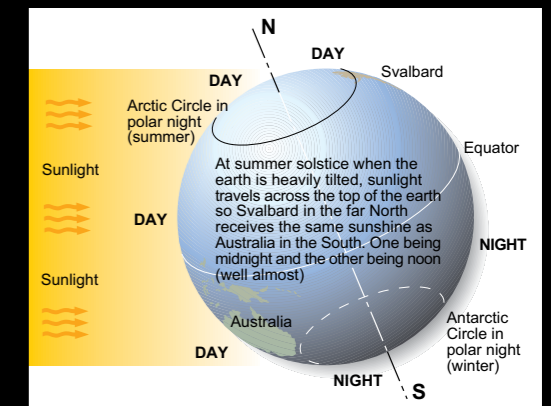


Glad to have missed the Polar Bears.



Walking with polar bear protection.

continued to the nearby fjord of Ymerbukta where we found good shelter and anchored in broad daylight ready for a hot meal and a night's rest, but the fantastic sunshine was too tempting. I wanted a photograph of the midnight sun in line with the north cardinal of the yacht's compass when Isobelle said "That sun is shining on Australia right now" which really made me think.



I have drawn a simple diagram (above) for those like me who marvel at such things. We were now beyond 78° North and looking at the ice distribution chart possibly the most northerly active sailing yacht in the world.

On Wednesday we set off trekking in deep snow, which made for slow progress and Olivier became concerned as our party spread out. He had encountered polar bears in the past and they look out for stragglers so he insisted we keep closer together. We found more of their tracks and even clumps of fur where one had rolled in the snow but alas, no actual polar bear.

From a navigational point of view I learned another important lesson about the polar region. When we entered the fjord it was stunningly attractive with snow clad mountains and the glacier running into the sea, but it was clear of ice and easy to navigate. Within hours we were completely surrounded by a sea of ice giving Robert and Franc a tough job threading our RIB to the shore. Being early summer there was no danger but I realised how easy it would be later in the season to overstay and have the yacht become totally icebound. We spent the evening watching an Arctic Fox hunt

for dinner in a silence broken only by the rumble of ice calving from the glacier. Thursday morning gave us a short hop further East to Borebukta (P15) for a final trek in this wilderness.

Our last sail under main, yankee and staysail was in sparkling sunshine and even the wind lost its chill as we approached Longyearbyen.

Longyearbyen - with a population nearing 3000 - rises from the waterfront jetties up a valley past a thriving commercial district of shops and bars towards mining accommodation now converted to an excellent guest-house. Everywhere is hard rock with little greenery other than lichen, sparse rough grass and the occasional flower sprouting out of the rock. Most pipe-work runs above ground, notably the hot water supply system from the power station that serves the whole community. Road building material abounded but houses were made of wood, which has to be imported. Mining has always been central to this economy and the relics of old shaft heads and abandoned conveyor pylons are everywhere.

Once ashore, we had time to explore so visited the local modern museum where we found a polar

bear! Naturally it was dead and stuffed but the islanders are keen to preserve their bears so there had to be a tale. Evidently this bear had surprised a trekking party and attacked them. The guide shot it five times to no avail. Even after his sixth and last bullet at a range of 3ft the bear still charged round before finally falling to the ground. On reflection, I'm relieved we didn't encounter one.

Much more fun and highly recommended was our encounter with huskies on the slopes above the town. Our instructor (Robert) helped us choose and hitch up our dogs before cantering across the

"I REMEMBER LITTLE OF THE COLD, GREY HORIZON-LESS SEAS"

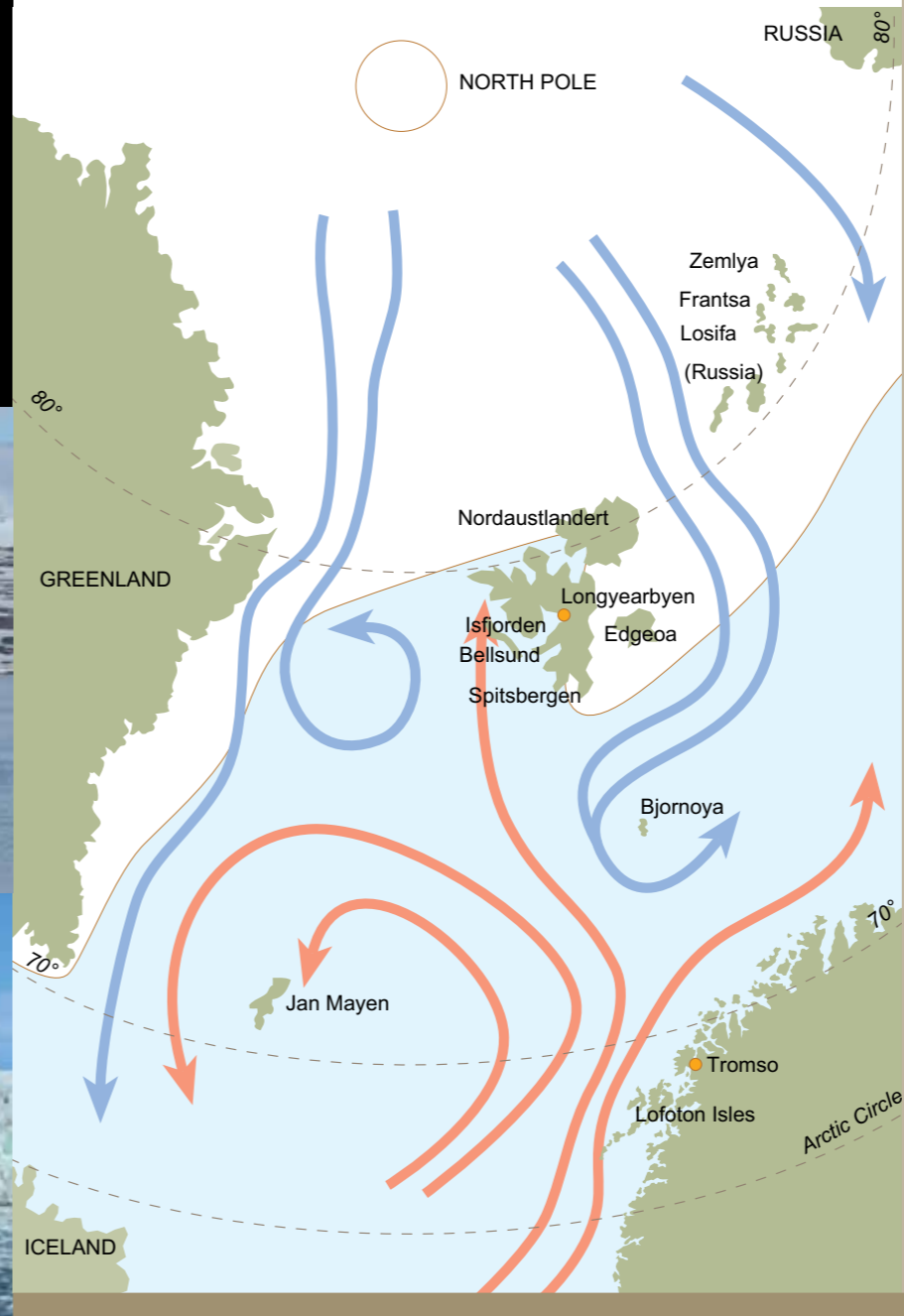


Heading ashore for another trek in the wilderness.



Endless sea-ice was stunning.

78°



snow. Once unhitched and kennelled it was time to feed our hard working and friendly dogs. Robert gave us a real insight into the difficulties of living at such high latitude and his need for straw put it in a nutshell. It cost him 900Kkr to buy and 6000Kkr to have delivered.

We had a final day around town buying souvenirs including a down jacket so I'll never be as cold again.

The focus of the trip was passage making so we had to motor through some flat calms which gave much more time to explore Spitsbergen. That was the real bonus of the trip. Unless you are dedicated to sea crossings I would strongly recommend joining Southern Star in Longyearbyen her summer base for exploring the far north. I remember little of the cold, grey horizon-less seas but the huge snow clad mountains, the towering ice walls and the desolate splendour of the region will last a lifetime in my memory.

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EQUIPMENT AND CHARTS

Supplies can be obtained locally but do take all specialist items with you.

COSTS

Norway was stunningly expensive so a tin of beer in a supermarket cost over £3 and most other things were typically double UK prices.

SVALBARD

Is not governed but rather managed by Norway under international agreement so there is no taxation. A bottle of beer costs less than the UK but purchase is strictly limited. We had to show our flight ticket and once a limit is reached the shop would sell no more.

CHARTS

For Passage

The British Admiralty 2228. From the Lofoton Isles via Bear Island to S. tip of Spitsbergen.

For Svalbard

Statens Kartverk Sjøkartverket
Norwegian State Charts, showing much more land topography than our Admiralty charts
504 Fra Sorkapp til Bellsund
503 Bellsund – Forlandsrevet, Isfjorden

WEATHER

Grib covers this area. Downloading weather data minimises network access and costs: www.grib.us.

CURRENTS

Cold and warm currents make a huge difference to the distribution of ice. See Admiralty Ocean Passages for the World

DAILY ICE FORECAST

retro.met.no/kyst_og_hav/iskart.html.

FLIGHTS

Norwegian Air & SAS (some BA). Prices vary a lot so staying longer actually cost us less.

SPITZBERGEN ACCOMMODATION

Hotels such as Radisson
Guest Houses - the huge Spitzbergen Guest House (but 20 mins walk up from town)

USING YOUR OWN YACHT

I helped a friend sail a yacht over from Eastbourne to Norway and then up the coast with the ultimate aim of reaching Svalbard. But difficulties abound and here are a few:

Getting a reasonable weather window for the passage; the distance in such cold seas; the cost and storage of Immersion Suits which are vital; different boat gas bottles and the ability to arm yourself. By law anyone outside designated habitations must carry adequate arms to protect themselves but it is difficult to get a gun licence as a non resident.