



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 (Kissthessea & Theorem / 2011), all well worth a look if your French is up to scratch.

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



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

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A great vantage point for spotting ice leads.