



World's Leading Polar  
Expedition Operator

# Bascamp Spitsbergen

25<sup>th</sup> June – 4<sup>th</sup> 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 Nikolay Parfenyuk,  
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** – Christophe Gouraud (France)

**Guide & Lecturer** – Sarah Mayer (Britain)

**Guide & Lecturer** - Andreas Umbreit (Germany)

**Kayak Guide** – Pete Gwatkin (Scotland)

**Dive Master** – Kelvin Murray (Scotland)

**Dive Guide** – Erin McFadden (Scotland)

**Dive Guide** – Jeremy Sutton (Britain)

**Hotel Manager** – Alan Hogan (Canadian)

**Chief Steward** – Marc Warmenhoven (The Netherlands)

**Head Chef** – Ralf Barthel (Germany)

**Assistant Chef** – Mathias Schmitt (Germany)

**Ship's Physician** – Alejandro Levin (Argentina)

# Day 1: 25<sup>th</sup> June 2012

## Embarkation: Longyearbyen, Spitsbergen

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

Weather: Wind, Temperature: Wind SW force 3, Partly cloudy, Sea calm.

Embarking from the pier in Longyearbyen was our first taste of 'zodiac' operations, as we were ferried to the ship in small rubber inflatable boats. Despite a poor weather forecast, the sun was shining and we spotted several fulmars, black guillemots and terns.

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.



We gathered in the lounge with champagne and high hopes for our own successful voyage. Expedition Leader Delphine Aurès proposed a toast to our expedition aboard *Plancius*.

The evening continued with safety 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.

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 eager preparation for our adventures ahead!

## Day 2 – Date 26<sup>th</sup> June 2012

### Ny Ålesund, Blomstrandhalvøya & 14<sup>th</sup> July Bukta

GPS 10.00 Position: 78°46.6'N 010°09.8E

Weather: Sunny! A light north easterly wind, clear skies, temperature 10°C

Great weather for our first day! During the morning as we continued to sail northwards we had a number of informative briefings. Mick gave an introduction to the birds of Spitsbergen followed by Delphine's briefing on how to minimize our impact whilst ashore, and how to remain safe in Polar bear country.

Soon it was time to land. Our first trip ashore was to be the last chance to enjoy civilisation, as we visited Ny Ålesund. Once a mining village, complete with families, schools and a hospital, this pretty town is now dedicated to science. Over a dozen nations maintain research stations here. We were able to visit the small museum, shop and post office before Jim and Andreas led entertaining walks to the airship mast used by Nobile and Amundsen on their flights to the north pole.



Back on board for a quick refreshment stop we then landed for a leg stretching hike at Ny London on Blomstrandhalvøya. We saw the remains of a failed mining operation, the pipe dream of an eccentric English man Ernest Mansfield who was lured north by the promise of gold. Nature was abundant among the history and we saw plenty

Svalbard reindeer, a Long-tailed skua and were treated to a fly-past by a pair of Red-throated divers amongst other delights.

After a lovely dinner, we once more took to the zodiacs. Wrapped up warm against a freshening breeze we set out for a short cruise to find some puffins and have a look at the snout of the 14<sup>th</sup> July Glacier. Although the sun will not set for another two months, it does dip towards the horizon in the evening and we enjoyed warm colours and lengthening shadows.

A packed, tiring but exciting first day!

## Day 3 – 27<sup>th</sup> June 2012

### Woodfjorden

**GPS 08.00 Position: 79°27.0'N 010°13.8'E**

**Weather: Cloudy and Bright**

A cloudy but bright start today as we entered the Woodfjord at 80°N. Breakfast at 08.00 was followed by a presentation from Sigi in which he covered a basic introduction to digital photography.

This morning's plans were to land and hike at Mushamna with diving and kayaking for the more adventurous. The sighting of two polar bears, one on land and the other on fast ice soon changed our minds. Instead we all boarded the zodiacs and set off in the hope of seeing these top predators.



Traveling as a group we very slowly entered the lagoon where one of the bears was sleeping on the sea ice. The crew of a Dutch yacht anchored nearby told us of how the bear had recently killed and eaten a Bearded seal. The remains of the seal lay close by the sleeping bear. Positioning the zodiacs so as not to awaken or frighten the animal we watched and photographed this magnificent male Polar bear as it slept off the heavy seal meal. The bear was in good condition and though it may not have eaten for several weeks we reckoned it to be a male of about 7 years of age. The other bear was last seen swimming away having lost out on any chance of sharing food with the older dominant male.

Nearby small groups of Common and King eiders swam around keeping a wary eye on us.



After lunch we sailed deeper into the fjord with a view to landing and hiking but instead we zodiac cruised to the Andøyane islands where the scout party had spotted a mother and cub. Sure enough on the snow lay a mother and her 6 month old cub. From the zodiacs we had a fine sight as the two animals lay close together and ignored our curious efforts to observe and photograph this charming scene.



Yet another bear was spotted at a location where we might have landed, so a ship cruise passing the magnificent Monaco glacier rounded off our activities for the day. However the divers set off at almost 22.00hrs and completed a dive returning to the ship just before midnight.

## Day 4 – 28<sup>th</sup> June 2012

### Sorgfjord & Murchisonfjord

GPS 08.00 Position: 79° 56.1' N 016° 44.5' E

Weather: Low clouds and occasional drizzle, brightening up a bit in the afternoon

As we woke up in the morning, the *Plancius* had rounded the northern most tip (Verlegenuken) of the main island of Spitsbergen and arrived in Sorgfjord at the northern entrance of Hinlopen Street. Already the distant view from the ship revealed a quite different world: high arctic scenery with very sparse vegetation and

much more basic forms of landscape when compared to our previous landings in the western parts of Spitsbergen.

Clouds covered the tops of the higher mountains and a polar bear was spotted on our originally intended landing site Eoluspynten, causing a spontaneous change of plan by expedition leader Delphine: after breakfast, we headed for Crozierpynten on the east side of the fjord.

Andreas and Mick took off first with the “long hikers” across the flat tundra towards the steep ascent to the plateau north of the famous Heklahuk mountain, after which all geology of Spitsbergen older than 400 millions of years (pre-Caledonian folding) is traditionally named. Indeed, they managed to struggle up a steep scree slope to the plateau edge, enjoying the overview from there, before sliding and jumping down



an equally steep snowfield again. The “medium hikers” took a longer walk on the flatter parts of the tundra, while the “leisure hikers” and photographers held themselves closer to the landing site. All of us saw the remains (still partly hidden under snow) of the Swedish wintering base of the Arc-of-Meridian Expedition (1899-1902), which for the first time ever determined the exact length of a minute of latitude so far north to get a better picture of the exact shape of the Earth – producing the first geometrically accurate map of Spitsbergen as a result.

While returning to the ship, the zodiacs took an extra swing to Eoluspynten for a close look at our first walruses, resting there peacefully on the beach.

During lunch, *Plancius* crossed the Hinlopenstretet to Nordaustlandet (Northeast Land), the second-biggest island of the archipelago. We anchored in Murchison Fjord, off the Swedish wintering station in Kinnvika, which was erected for the International Geophysical Year in 1953.



For the “long hikers”, a new route, never tried with *Plancius*, was attempted. The team were dropped by zodiac deeper inside Murchison Fjord, and then hiked back over a range of low mountain tops with good view to Kinnvika. “Medium hikers” set out on a walk northwards on the partly wet tundra, looking also for various birds, while “leisure hikers” and photographers stayed closer to the old station.

Divers and kayakers explored parts of the northern end of Murchison Fjord.



Especially lucky were the few who had decided to stay on board: an inquisitive polar bear was suddenly spotted, swimming around the ship at fairly close range with no signs of fear, causing cameras to click, before it swam away towards land near Kinnvika, trying in vain to stalk a seal there.

## Day Number 5 – 29<sup>th</sup> June 2012

### Phippsøya on the Sjuøyane archipelago

**GPS 08.00 Position: 80° 40.351N 020° 75.776E**

**Weather: Foggy followed by clear and sunny 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 anyone else went ashore. As much as we like to see Polar bears from the safety of the ship or zodiac, we would not like to have a close encounter with one on land, hence this normal precaution.

The report came back that there were no bears within sight. However because it was quite foggy, we would change the planned hikes. The idea now was to go for a short walk across the saddle separating the landing from the other side of the island



to look at a group of Walrus that were hauled out on the beach.

We made our way to the landing on the zodiacs, and as small groups were formed ashore, they departed for the short walk across the snow and over the saddle. Once we got there, we formed a thin line, with a guide on each end, and walked slowly along the beach

towards the slumbering walrus, which looked like so many sacks of blubber, except these had some nice long ivory tusks! This technique, if used well, allows us to get within the acceptable distance to the walrus without stressing them unnecessarily.

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. There were Arctic terns, the ever present Eider ducks, and several species of gulls, the most interesting one being the Ivory gull.

In the meantime, as the morning progressed, the fog disappeared and it became a glorious sunny day, with clear blue skies. This change in weather meant that we were also able to do more activities in the better visibility. Some groups went hiking for longer whilst others just rambled about covering little 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, looking for the edge of the sea ice. This we found pretty soon, and around 3pm word came over the PA system of a swimming bear that had been spotted. We all made our way to the open decks, as the ship slowly approached, and

kept a safe distance from the bear, which soon climbed up on the floating sea ice, and walked about. Delphine explained that this bear (a healthy looking male) was probably seeking for better ice, since the one here was quite fragmented, and of course, the bear would be looking for its



preferred prey, the seal. After some time, we let the bear go on its way and we continued our own journey along the floes in hopes of spotting more wildlife. The sightings later included some Harp Seals swimming in the icy seas.

At the end of the day our furthest north for the voyage was reached 82 degrees 21 minutes.

## Day 6 – 30<sup>th</sup> June 2012

### Torellneset & Palanderbukta

**GPS 08.45 Position: 79° 21.08 1N 020° 41.0E**

**Weather: Cloudy with sunny spells.**

While the hikers and kayakers enjoyed amazing above surface sights at Torellneset, the divers sought out another exploratory dive site. Two zodiacs ploughed out toward a small and rugged island, where the divers would be taking their 7<sup>th</sup> icy plunge of the trip. The Arctic is well known for its larger marine species such as walrus, various species of seals and whales – and of course the polar bear. But, beneath the waves there are a variety of more elusive ecosystems and species. Very few people have witnessed these sights – partly because it takes a very hardy diver to brave these waters, but of course also due to the sheer remoteness of this area. For those who do get to witness Arctic waters first hand, there is rich reward.



Around such islands the seafloor is swathed in kelp fronds (seaweed). Various species of anemones, urchins, snails and crabs are peppered throughout the kelp and the water column is sprinkled with stunning jellies of various forms and intriguing colours. To surface from such dives, surrounded by the imposing yet calm Arctic landscape, is

amazing. What was also quite surreal about this morning's dive was our trip onto land to view the walrus herd afterward. Very few people have ever dived with walrus and it is viewed as a risky venture. It is the sheer size and weight of these animals that is the danger –whereas an inquisitive seal would make for a happy

underwater encounter, an inquisitive walrus could make for a disastrous underwater encounter. As such we viewed the Walrus from the safety of the shore, rather than on scuba.

Our afternoon saw us travel to Palanderbukta. This fjord was spectacular – fast ice, glaciers and gentle mountains surrounded the ship. Ice makes for some incredible diving and this was our chance to get under the ice. Kelvin took it upon himself to check the solidity of the ice by standing on it. He fell in. Still, it would make for a good dive site. This was perhaps the best dive of the trip so far. The divers stayed very near the surface, enjoying the ice from beneath. Above water the ice is striking and often beautiful. From underwater the ice is no less striking as it takes on a new form: the colours, light and shapes are novel – in a way it all appears more elaborate.

From the edge of the fast ice we could smell the evening's barbeque and swiftly made a beeline back to the ship. The barbeque was swathed in the late Arctic sunshine and the Chief Officer certainly entertained his passengers with a few flings around the dance floor on the aft deck. Enjoying a barbeque in the Arctic was quite an experience and not one any of us will forget in a hurry.



## Day 7 – 1<sup>st</sup> July 2012

### Alkefjellet and Faksevågen

GPS 08.00 Position: 79° 39.8N 018° 36.5E

Weather: Cloudy with sunny spells.



Still a bit sleepy from last night's dancing we were woken by Delphine at 7:45 as we sailed into Hinlopenstretet. We left *Plancius* in the zodiacs after breakfast, to visit the largest colony of guillemots on Svalbard, a colony of Brünnich's guillemots that breed on cliffs dropping almost vertically into the

sea. Even before we reached the cliffs, dozens of birds were in the water near the boats and they allowed us to come very close before they either dived or flew away. As we approached the cliffs where an estimated 65,000 pairs breed, the bird song was quite incredible, and the sky teeming with guillemots leaving or arriving at the ledges.

The pairs of birds do not build a nest but rather the female lays a pear-shaped, bluish, speckled egg. Both parents incubate the egg and shelter the chick on their feet! How they manage to do this is an amazing thought! Most of us, if not all, looked on in awe of such an extraordinary experience. We spotted a number of Glaucous gulls and some of us were lucky to see a fox. These are the two main predators at Alkefjellet. Surprisingly, a number of barnacle geese were present, which is unusual because they most likely breed along the west coast.

The afternoon was dedicated to hikers! Andreas and Mick were guiding us on a high ridge where we were rewarded with splendid views across the fjord to Nordaustlandet. Below us we saw the two receding Skinfakse- and Gullfakse glaciers. Delphine, Jim, JJ and Christophe were leading the medium hikers towards the top of a mountain where we had an awesome view to the Lomfjord where a Rock ptarmigan was waiting for! Close to the landing site Sarah was looking for plants and especially the Spider saxifrage but we were a bit too early in the season.



## Day 8 – 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2012

### Raudfjord & the islands of the North-west

**GPS 08.00 Position: 79°43.8N 012°11.1E**

**Weather: Sunny, with very little wind all day.**

With some guests still enjoying post activity beverages, a 1am call for a chance to view a pod of Fin whales in somewhat blustery sailing conditions commenced what was to be a full day of activities.



Breakfast saw many tired eyes emerge into a perfect scenic and sun filled morning in Raudfjord (the Red fjord, referring to the old red sandstone rocks that can be found in certain areas). The West side of the fjord has no less than 10 calving glaciers with the largest,

Raudfjordbreen having a 3km front. Boats spilled in all directions with the divers making an 8km epic journey to the impressive cliffs in the North west near Konglomeratodden. On the Eastern side of the fjord, where the glaciers are smaller, the hikers immersed themselves in scenery and history. The West-Spitsbergen current keeps this area relatively ice free, and as a result Raudfjord has seen a long human involvement. The 17<sup>th</sup> century saw whaling activity (some graves can be seen at Bruceneset), whilst Norwegian trappers latterly discovered the area to be good for hunting of both Polar bear and Arctic fox (huts may be found in a couple of locations).



Whether hiking, kayaking or diving, the views this morning were stunning and the weather hot. As a result, not wishing to let the divers be the only people to enjoy these frigid waters, some people actually decided to have a swim!

A short sail during lunch brought us into the islands around the North-west. Diving and kayaking continued in the relatively sheltered waters. Those going ashore at Ytre Norskøyane not only enjoyed the history and scenery, but also braved Arctic tern attack. Even the divers managed to land and take in this 'experience'.

To round off the day, after dinner, those still with energy enjoyed a trip to the Little auk colony of Fuglesangen, where, sitting in silence, they were surrounded by tens of thousands of these lively little birds.

With all guests on board by 11pm, a long but rewarding day was ended!



## Day 9 – 3rd July 2012

### Prins Karls Foreland

**GPS 08.00 Position: 78°54.3N 010°26.5E**

**Weather: A little more cloudy than we are used to! But little wind.**

We enjoyed a few extra minutes in bed this morning following our late night activities yesterday. Anchor was dropped off the northern most point of Prins Karls Foreland at a place called Fuglehuken. It is difficult to land on this exposed point but today we were blessed with flat calm sea conditions. This landing showed us a little bit of everything that Spitsbergen has to offer. For wildlife, we were able to see Reindeer, Arctic skua and one or two members of the northernmost colony of Harbour seals.

The long hikers found various peri-glacial features in the landscape. These included rock glaciers (large moving bodies of ice that are completely hidden beneath loose rocks) and stone polygons pictured below.



All groups were able to explore the various remains from human activities to be found in the area. These including a trapper's hut, older earth cabins and numerous graves. We found no remains of whaling stations or blubber ovens, which suggests that the graves are likely to be from the second Spitsbergen whaling period during the 18<sup>th</sup> Century when most of the whaling work was done on board ship: the crews only coming ashore to



bury their dead.

This was a beautiful and enjoyable landing in an arctic tundra landscape rich with life.

In the afternoon we crossed to the eastside of the Foreland Sundet and landed for a quick glacier excursion over the snout of the Comfortlessbreen glacier. In order to get to the glacier we had to slog through some glacial mud – evidence of the recent ‘surge’ made by this glacier.

During the afternoon and early evening we enjoyed various activities as we neared the end of the expedition: Sigi showed us his Leica photo slide show, the results of the photo competition was announced and we had a fare-well toast.

*Plancius*, our comfortable home for the last nine days sailed us on our the final leg of our voyage south past the island of Prins Karls Foreland and into the broad Isfjord, destination Longyearbyen.

**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 1072 nautical miles!**

\* \* \*

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

