

I Went Swimming in the Arctic and Survived

By: MONA GABLE, Sep 30, 2014

To say that I could not believe I was in the Arctic sounds trite. But as I hung perilously over the bow, one hand gripping my camera so it wouldn't bang the rail, I was in awe.

Below me, a steel wedge was breaking the ice as the National Geographic Explorer churned in the black Barents Sea. The wind was howling, and my cheeks stung from the cold. But for the first time in my life, I didn't mind. Out there in the vast glimmering landscape of ice and mountains and snow were polar bears.

It was June, and I was on a Lindblad voyage in the Svalbard, a chain of Norwegian islands some 600 miles from the North Pole. The trip was full of adventure. The day before, I'd pulled on my Muckboots and trudged up a rocky slope, glaciers spreading far below. I'd seen a scraggly fox, tawny reindeer, and orange-beaked puffins.



I saw a lot of different animals, including the orange-beaked puffin.

(Photo: Mona Gable)

I'd also seen the rifles carried by our guides.

The rifles were required in case of a polar bear attack. "If you see a polar bear on land, it is not a photo opportunity," joked Jason Kelley, one of our naturalists.

Svalbard, the archipelago of deep fjords we were exploring, is one of only two areas in the Arctic where polar bears breed, sleep, and hunt for seals. Some naturalists in our group, who have been coming to Svalbard since the 1980s, said they have never seen the summer ice so low. It was forcing the bears to travel farther and farther for food.

The walrus population is in danger, too. One morning we were out in the Zodiac when we saw some giant brown shapes. Occupying a small slab of ice and dozing in the sun was a male walrus the size of a refrigerator.

As we approached, he didn't even flinch. I could hear his snorting breaths and noticed that his tusks were broken. Our guide, Kenneth, surmised that he'd been in a fight with another male or that he had snapped off his tusks scraping the sea bottom for clams.



I visited Svalbard, the chain of Norwegian islands some 600 miles from the North Pole.

(Photo: Mona Gable)



A massive walrus dozing in the sun. (Photo: Mona Gable)

On the third day, I was in my cabin when expedition leader Lisa Trotter, the first American woman to scuba dive in Antarctica, spoke over the PA system. Trotter, who scanned maps and decided where the ship should go, said, "Good morning. We have spotted a polar bear. He's about four miles out on the ice."

We all huddled at the rail, and I craned my neck and squinted to see the amazing creature. We'd been urged to be quiet because the bears easily startle.

"Where is it?" I whispered to Eileen, an American science teacher on board.

"It's right there." She handed me her binoculars.



I never tired of seeing polar bears on my adventure. (Photo: Mona Gable)

I could see only mounds of white against a pale blue sky, but I'd been told that the best way to spot a bear was to search for a "yellow dot." And that's when I saw him.

I gasped. He was lounging by a hole, hoping for a seal to pop out. A tag was clipped to one tiny ear so that biologists could track him, and for a long time, he didn't move. Sometimes bears wait an entire day for a single seal. The ship began to slowly back up, the engines groaning.

I was glad to be on the Explorer, because I had

some amazing experts there to describe the scenery. First I'd go to the bridge so I could hear Captain Oliver Kruess, a droll German who has been navigating the Arctic for decades, describe the fjords and the ice levels. Then I'd head outdoors and scramble down the stairs to the bow or up to the highest deck. Bundled in down, I'd stay until I was shaking with cold just observing nature.



I grew up swimming in the warm waters of the Pacific. I hate the cold. Yet when it came time to do a polar dive, I surprised myself by leaping feet-first off a platform into the most freezing water on Earth. I didn't even blink at the opportunity, but when my body hit the water, I screamed. I drifted for a bit before realizing how cold the water really was, and then I scrambled back to the boat.

The ice was mesmerizing. One afternoon I was looking out my porthole

at the slate-colored sky when icy chunks of turquoise and lime swirled by. Another day we glided past a polar icecap layered in cream and teal.

I never tired of seeing polar bears on my adventure. (Photo: Mona Gable)



We were far north when we saw another bear. He was roaming from one ice patch to the next in open water. He had just killed a seal. Its carcass lay in a pool of blood on the snow.

Suddenly the bear stopped and stood up. His head swiveled, and he sniffed the air. He watched us, swaying on his wide feet. He was so close I could see the black skin peeking through his white fur.

Over seven days, I saw 30 bears, including two cubs. I never got tired of being

The summer ice is so low that polar bears are forced to travel farther and farther for food. (Photo: Mona Gable)

awakened to hear, "Good morning, we have spotted a polar bear out on the ice." Cruising in the Arctic was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and I'll never forget the beauty I encountered looking out at ice, mountains, and clouds of mist.

Search



Cruising the waters of the Arctic. (Photo: Mona Gable)