

# Welcome to Polar Bear Country



by Ir. Chin Mee Poon  
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**OUR** Boeing 737 took less than 1½ hours to cross the Barents Sea from Tromsø in northern Norway to Longyearbyen in Svalbard.

Welcome to polar bear country!

When I was planning my trip to the Nordic countries, I did not forget to include Svalbard in the itinerary. Svalbard first caught my attention when my wife and I visited Caerlaverock Wetland near Dumfries in Scotland in late November 2008. Every year, some 25,000 barnacle geese fly a few thousand kilometres from Spitsbergen to overwinter in the Wetland and nearby areas. Spitsbergen is the largest of the islands that make up Svalbard.

The Svalbard archipelago, with a total land area of 61,022 sq km, is situated midway between continental Norway and the North Pole. It is the northernmost place on earth with a permanent settlement.

Dutch explorer Willem Barentsz discovered Svalbard in 1596. He named the islands Spitsbergen or “sharp mountains”. Spitsbergen became a whaling base 15 years later, and whaling activities continued there until 1820s. In the meantime, other hunters arrived to hunt walrus, seal, polar bear and arctic fox. Coal was discovered on the islands and mining commenced in 1899. It is still on-going in the Russian settlement of Barentsburg and the Norwegian settlement of Sveagruva.

According to the Svalbard Treaty of 1920 that came into effect in 1925, Norway has sovereignty over the archipelago. All 40 signatory countries of the Treaty, however, have the right to conduct commercial activities on the archipelago without discrimination, although those activities are subject to Norwegian legislation. Other requirements of the Treaty also ensure that Svalbard is administered differently from the rest of Norway.

My wife and I spent 3 nights in Longyearbyen, the largest settlement in Svalbard. Longyearbyen is situated near the centre of Spitsbergen. We arrived on 9th September and missed the midnight sun by more than half a month. At a latitude of 78.2°N, Longyearbyen experiences midnight sun from 20th April to 23rd August. It also has a long polar night that runs from 26th October to 15th February. We spent most of our time in the town. A tourist information office shared a large avant-garde building with the Svalbard Museum and the University Centre in Svalbard. Nearby was the Spitsbergen Airship Museum. Longyearbyen also had a hospital, schools, cultural centre, sports centre, cinema, library, church, bank, art galleries, supermarkets, restaurants, hotels, travel agencies and a coal-fired power station to generate electricity. It is a full-fledged little town. There are no roads linking Longyearbyen to other settlements on Spitsbergen though.

Longyearbyen is also where the Svalbard Global Seed Vault is located. The vault, officially opened on 26.02.2008, preserves a wide variety of plant seeds that are duplicate samples, or “spare” copies, of seeds held in gene banks worldwide.

We did get away from Longyearbyen by joining a cruise that took us to see Esmark Glacier and to visit the Russian mining settlement of Barentsburg. It was a pity that we did not come across any polar bear, walrus, fox or reindeer during our stay in Svalbard. But we did see two ringed seals basking on separate ice floes as well as puffins and fulmars. We also saw quite a number of barnacle geese and some Arctic terns. And we had an exhilarating experience dog-sledding on the road! We had a truly marvelous time in Svalbard. ■

*Ir. Chin Mee Poon is a retired civil engineer who derives a great deal of joy and satisfaction from travelling to different parts of the globe, capturing fascinating insights of the places and people he encounters and sharing his experiences with others through his photographs and writing.*

