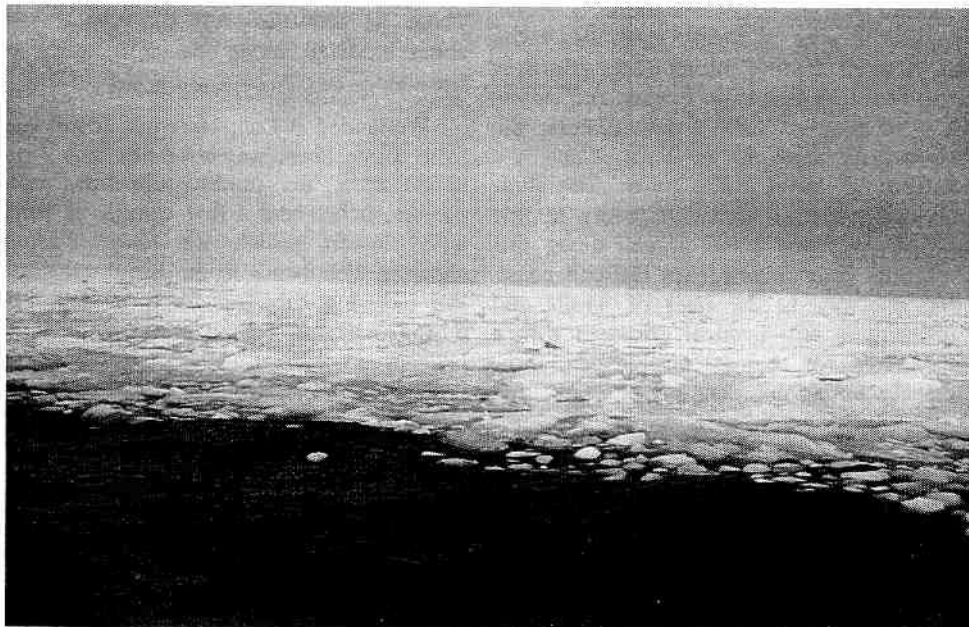


SOMEWHERE VERY DIFFERENT



EDGE OF THE POLAR ICE-CAP. Lat. 80° 42' N. Long. 10° 03'E.

13th July 1979 at 11.52 hrs.

IN THE APRIL / MAY issue of this magazine an article by my wife was included under the title of "Somewhere Different". My own view is that many of the places that she (and indeed, now, both of us) have visited could also come under the same heading. Not for us the mass pilgrimage to the sun-drenched beaches of the Mediterranean with its crowds of sun worshippers. The sun is not unimportant to us, it is just not the main priority. Again, when my wife leaves the confines of Milton, she tends to turn to the north, rather like the needle of a magnetic compass, whereas most other people turn south.

On one notable occasion when we were discussing holidays, the conversation went something like this:- My wife: "What about going to Spitzbergen this year?" Me: "Spitzbergen, that's somewhere near the North Pole!" My wife: "Yes".

This direct approach and economy of words calls for caution and a need to consider carefully what may be in the "small print" of such a proposition.

We went to Spitzbergen - and beyond.

Spitzbergen is served by ships which can only approach in the summer from mid-June to early August. For the remaining months it is completely surrounded by pack-ice and covered in deep snow. Reservations are taken up quickly, so that we had to wait some eighteen months for a cabin. It lies about 600 miles north of Norway, comprises four main islands, and is the northernmost land mass between Norway and the North Pole. A further 100 miles north brings one to the edge of the Polar ice-cap in summer. This was to be our goal. During the spring, the ice extends up to 300 miles more to the south and

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drift-ice may even reach the northern coast of Norway in the winter.

Our voyage to Spitzbergen was taken on a small trading vessel (approximately 2,300 tons) sailing from Bergen and calling at a number of coastal towns along the Norwegian coast up to North Cape - a distance of about 1,290 miles. The ships are designed to manoeuvre easily in and out of the many ports of call along that beautiful, mountainous, but difficult coastline. Norway is the land of Trolls and giants, who are mythical creatures with a reputation for being mischievous. Fortunately we did not meet any of them.

This was the month of July. We landed at North Cape and took photographs of each other at midnight with hand-held cameras. The sun was well above the horizon. We re-embarked for Spitzbergen at about 1.30 a.m. for nearly two days sailing.

On our way across the Norwegian Sea we called at a remote and lonely radio station on a small island some 300 miles north of Norway. The approach from the south was spectacular - cliffs rising sheer out of the water for several hundred feet. The land dropped steeply to the north, almost to sea level, and running on for about 12 miles. It was first discovered by a Dutchman in 1596. He saw a polar bear on the land and named it Bear Island. (Positive thinking that).

We reached Spitzbergen the following day about noon. It was a mysterious place, very mountainous and somewhat forbidding. Much of the land is covered by snow and ice even in the summer. Terrible storms ravage the region in winter. For three months in the summer the sun does not set. For six months there is more or less continuous twilight, and for the remaining three months complete darkness. Yet people live and work there - mainly in two mining settlements -

Longyearbyen (Norwegian) and Barentsburg (a Russian concession). These lie near the west coast in a fjord about midway along the 230 miles of coastline.

We landed at Longyearbyen. It was free from snow. There was not a tree or a shrub to be seen, the tundra supporting only mosses, lichen and a few clumps of small wild flowers which we found bravely showing their heads in the warm sunshine. We stayed in this area for three days and during that period went north to the Polar ice cap.

Our ship left Longyearbyen at night. We had expected to see the drift-ice at about 9.00 a.m. but a strong wind had sprung up during the night and all the ice had been driven north. The ship rolled heavily pursuing its course. In spite of the motion of the vessel we all stayed on deck, gripping the rail firmly, looking for the first signs of the ice.

Suddenly at about noon we saw it. Our captain took the ship right up to the edge of the ice. There, stretching out in front of us was the Polar ice-cap - hundreds of miles of it, some two to four metres thick, rising and falling heavily in the swell. A light grey mist hung over it all, a scene of utter desolation, an awesome sight. There was a silence broken only by the subdued conversation of the passengers and the clicking of camera shutters as we all took numerous photographs of ourselves and the ice, in this never-to-be-forgotten place. We were about 640 miles from the North Pole (roughly the distance between Plymouth and Inverness).

This was a great day. On the 13th July, 1979 at 11.52 hrs our little ship, her crew and passengers, lay in a position Lat. 80° 42'N. and Long. 10° 03'E - all alone, far from any other ships and any other signs of civilisation. We were truly on top of the world.

After about half an hour our ship began to move away to return to Spitzbergen. We could not stay, but were reluctant to leave. We had been drawn to this remote and, as it were, primeval, area of the planet, maybe not without some feeling of apprehension, but could not easily break away, fascinated by what to us was a glimpse of the Great Unknown.

We would not have missed it for anything.

We turned south and immediately headed straight into the teeth of a dreadful gale. Our gallant little vessel pitched and rolled, and did everything but turn over. Huge waves crashed onto the deck, and there were times when we seemed to be more under the water than above it.

Fortunately my wife and I did not suffer too much discomfort. It took six long hours to reach the comparatively sheltered waters of north Spitzbergen. Another day here and then we sailed for Norway, eventually arriving at Bergen five days later - after a voyage of 3,778 miles.

In this brief sketch I have only just touched on some of the many places we called at. My object has been to show how far one can go if one tries. Anyone can do it. You just have to book up with the Norwegian Coastal Steamer Service.

Where to next? Everest? I think not. By all accounts it's rather overcrowded these days. You almost have to queue up to climb the mountain. Not to worry, I am sure my wife will think of SOMEWHERE.

Maurice G.A. Jackson.

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