

COVER FEATURE

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REALM OF THE POLAR BEAR

Young adventurer **Tybalt Peake** sets sail for Svalbard to ski and climb in Norway's pristine Arctic playground...

WORDS TYBALT PEAKE PICTURES VEGA EXPEDITIONS

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June 2016: I felt in my element as I boarded the ice-strengthened vessel Origo to embark on my ski touring trip of Svalbard. We were going to spend nine days exploring this remote high Arctic region and hopefully bag some first ascents too.

Civilisation soon evaporated as we ventured out through the Ice Fjord. I breathed in salty fresh air and looked up at the northern fulmars following us. I like these grey and white seabirds related to the albatross. I hadn't seen any since last autumn in Alaska when I finished sailing the North West Passage. The fulmars had been good company during that four-month voyage. Now I watched them circling as we started our journey north to Trygghamna. I had that huge sense of liberation that comes with escaping on a new adventure.

My first day in Svalbard was one of the best of my life. What a privilege to get the chance to ski on the planet's northernmost mountains under the midnight sun? And, best of all, with a crazy bunch of characters that skied insanely, drank fiercely and jumped in Arctic waters as though it were a hotel swimming pool.

HOUSEKEEPING

The first task onboard Origo was to sort out kit. I helped tie down kayaks and did various jobs, then went to my cabin to organise my stuff. The good thing about ski touring is that everything is lightweight. My set-up comprised of the must-ride Blizzard Peacemakers, the most versatile twin tips ever invented. I paired them with Dynafit Beast 16 bindings and Salomon MTN carbon S3 poles. My boots are Salomon from the awesome Sole Boot Lab in Chamonix, and I use Berghaus clothing. Tweaking and discussing gear is an obsession of mine. As I stashed things I mentally ticked off my kitlist in my head: skins, avalanche transceiver, spare battery, shovel, search probe, crampons, ice axe, harness and rescue kit. Once I was sure it was all there I started to relax.

It was incredible to be back in the Arctic again. A sailor once told me that you either love or hate it, but if it's the former then you will always yearn to be there. I didn't believe him at first, but he was right – the frozen kingdom of jutting snow-covered peaks and polar bears are never far from my thoughts. Now when I'm not there my mind is plotting ways to get back.

As we headed north along the coast of Svalbard I remembered my first day in the Arctic. It was this time last year and I was on a 49' sailboat called Snowdragon. We were halfway between Nova Scotia and Greenland and I was glued to the co-ordinates waiting for my dream to come true. I decided my entry into the Arctic Circle needed to be memorable, so I dived off the boat and swam with all my might. The water was zero degrees; I could barely breathe but I knew the life I'd yearned for had begun. I was in the Arctic.

Now I was back again in this magical place on a skiing exped. I flew to Longyearbyen (meaning Long Year Town), arriving at 2am. I'm always edgy arriving alone in case some officious border control chucks me into care for being an unaccompanied minor. I tucked my chin into my buff and hid my face. I needn't have worried as no one looked at me, or my passport. Now the only concern was getting to my hostel which was over an hour's walk away. I wasn't sure they'd have transport at this hour.

BEAR SCARE

I didn't relish hiking with my luggage and was concerned about polar bear protocol. Might I meet one wandering around town? I stumbled into one once so am more cautious now. I'd gone to explore Philpott's Island (during my North West Passage adventure) and didn't know the way back to the boat so ran up a hill to look from the highest point. As I was jogging I had a memory of being told to take care as you approach a ridge, as a bear might be hidden there. I slowed as the thought registered and a few feet in front of me was this huge ➤



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bear... huge, as in the size of a car! She opened her eyes, yawned and we looked at each other.

I froze, then backed away. She followed me step for step, then panic took over and I fled scrambling over the boulder-strewn terrain. After a few hundred metres I turned to see her still coming towards me, while making a curious blowing sound and clicking her jaw; I now know this is a defensive display of aggression. I fired my rifle skywards but she was immune to the shattering bang. I fired again – still no reaction. I moved on slowly and finally she stayed put. Despite my close encounter, the polar bear is still my favourite animal!

CLEAR AND PRESENT DANGER

Polar bears were also on my mind as I’d talked to some people just before leaving Wales who had met in Svalbard. They’d enthused about the place but were quiet about exactly what they’d done there. Finally they explained that they’d been part of the expedition in 2011 when the British schoolboy Horatio was killed by a polar bear.

My head was full of all these thoughts as I walked out of Longyearbyen Airport and so I was relieved to see a taxi. The 24-hour daylight meant I could scrutinise the town as we drove passed a mishmash of functional buildings and shipping containers, reminding me of other Arctic settlements I’ve travelled through. These places are a gateway to the most secluded wilderness on the planet and if they are rather ugly, I don’t care.

My eyes focused on two huge glacier tongues snaking their way out of town. We drove to the end of the valley and pulled up outside Guesthouse 102, a large sprawling wooden building. I always feel at home in hostels. It’s probably because I grew up in a converted church in Snowdonia which my mum runs as a B&B. I’ve always been surrounded by guests who were mostly climbers and mountaineers, many of whom have become good friends. I’d tag along on days out and I guess that lifestyle became my norm.

On deck, as the fulmars overhead cawed in dissent I chatted to my dorm-mate Gerrit, who was maybe 40. He was from Seattle and had worked for Intel before packing it in to ski. As we headed north the mountains became more apparent, hundreds of peaks rising dramatically out of the sea jutting up 3000 feet and littered with steep couloirs. They’d be fairly inaccessible without a boat. I gazed at them longingly, knowing some had probably never been climbed. I wondered how much of a window the weather, wind and ice would give us to play.

My thoughts were interrupted when our guide, Vera, called us for a safety briefing. Later at dinner everyone introduced themselves, saying cool things. I, on the other hand, mumbled awkwardly. In the UK I’m

The ice-strengthened vessel, the MS Origo, was home for the 9-day expedition



The author enjoying perfect conditions



“No other feeling touches the joy I have when my skis are playing on an unadulterated blanket of snow, constantly adapting as little rocks and ruts appear, sharp rhythmic turns until the terrain is more forgiving and then a straight line exit leaving fresh tracks in my wake.”

vegetarian, but I eat whatever when I'm away as I feel it's more likely to be hunted or sustainably-sourced local produce and not part of the vile mass, cruel destruction of animals that I abhor. I enjoyed what I think was reindeer at dinner. I sat next to Squash Falconer, who is a bit of a legend. She rides a BMW motorbike faster than most blokes, goes off solo exploring mountain ranges, climbing everything from Everest to Mont Blanc while doing crazy things like paragliding off the summit.

I assumed everyone was winding down for bed but then at 10.30pm Vera announced we should get kitted up as we were going out. We jumped in the dinghy and made our way to shore and headed through moraine for 30 minutes till we came to the foot of Protectorbreen (Protector) Glacier. It curls up into steep mountains stacked with couloirs. I was stoked putting on skins and enjoyed the rhythm of gaining height, as we checked angles while constantly assessing the snow pack.

I was pleased that the people I was with were nice as I had reservations about doing a group thing. A couple of weeks before I'd been training on Gran Paradiso and watched a guided group near the summit. One launched his ski off an edge utterly unconcerned by his stupidity. I needn't have worried as Vera had picked an awesome bunch.

I was hypnotised by the remote wilderness as we glided through Protector Glacier under our own steam. Within an hour we were at the 500m mark. I breathed in crisp, energising, unpolluted air while observing the never-ending cascade of peaks. I savoured the cinematic view before the fun began as we all launched off the face, racing down. No other feeling touches the joy I have when my skis are playing on an unadulterated blanket of snow, constantly adapting as little rocks and ruts appear, sharp rhythmic turns until the terrain is more forgiving and then a straight line exit leaving fresh tracks in my wake. We were all in our own worlds, weaving individual lines along this unknown mountain illuminated by the midnight sun, snaking our way back to the speck in the distant Arctic Ocean that was Origo.

On the way back, Vera said we should leave our skis in the dinghy. I winced knowing what a savage beast salt water can be. I'm a bit OCD with kit, so have to force myself to chill or it would drive me insane. My gear for Svalbard was minimal, although being a skier that's a bit of a misnomer. My packing rule is only take what I can carry. This stems from having a bag pinched when I was 12 years old (losing that kit is still traumatic for me four years on); I was on my own, trying to make my way from Zermatt to Cervina across the glacier. I had too much to carry and left a bag in the lift station and when I went back it was gone. Now I only take what I can carry.

The first night the 'zzz-quota' was low. I think probably everyone was a bit hyper, and the sea waves meant it was hard staying comfortably horizontal. We sailed 98km

north to St Jonsfjorden.

Gerrit and I overslept and had only minutes to grab our stuff in a bleary frenzy before launching ourselves into the dinghy. I was half asleep as we headed ashore, gazing through the thin mist as it lifted to reveal a vast expanse of snowy terrain jutting up from the water: peaks beckoning to be explored.

We were on the curiously-named Oscar II Land and headed off from Paulbreen on a 20km quest. We traversed the Osbornbreen Glacier then, after six hours, topped out on Devikfjellet Mountain. I chatted to the guide Endre who is a serious climber – I'd like to be him. The summit led on to an endless ridge reminding me of Crib Goch; it had dramatic drop-offs which gave us all a buzz. The connection within our group became more focused as we ventured further into this exposed environment. On the way back, as we crossed Devikbreen Glacier, I chatted mainly to Squash. I felt a bit faint as I'd not taken enough fluid, so drank from a dirty glacial puddle which didn't taste good.

On the boat it was hard to sleep with the constant daylight and euphoria of being in this epic landscape. I enjoyed chatting to one of the guys, Jerry, who runs Texenergy – a company that creates eco power for expeditions. Their products are indestructible and can be dropped off a cliff and still function. Jerry is developing the most advanced power sources out there that can be charged by sun, wind or manual turning – a game-changer for remote areas. It's inspiring talking to someone so intelligent on every level. He wasn't bothered that I'd left school and was only 16. We chatted about the negatives of school-based learning.

SCHOOL DAZE

I hated every second in a classroom and always ran away. When I was 10 I was excluded for a full year because I was deemed too much at risk of disappearing into the wilderness. I'd sit in class, waiting, and when the opportunity arose I'd jump the playground wall and run till I was free. The place I liked to escape to was a mountain called Siabod. I left school for good when I was 14 and ran away to the Arctic, as I knew the LEA wouldn't be able to get me there!

As we all socialised till the early hours, we sailed 176km to the Fjord of Bear. I excitedly checked my co-ordinates and realised we were at 79.65N, nearly 80, and obviously the pole is at 90. The furthest I'd been before was 78 18N at Etha Fjord, in Greenland, when we got trapped by ice and couldn't get any further.

The next morning we headed ashore in a white-out. We had a fantastic day skiing the 700m Brattkleivbreen. The round trip was about 6km and most of us did it twice. I like white-outs as you need to rely on other senses as visuals evaporate. It is eerie that the only tangible trace of others are disembodied voices; you know they are close by, but they are blurred from view.

Climbing a ridge with views across the polar ocean – just 1,100km to the North Pole!



The calm waters of the fjord at the beginning of the day's adventures

“We discovered a big hole midway, created by a huge boulder and we all stood in a circle peering in, till we realised we were on a precarious snow bridge.”

It was great skiing on this obscured mountain. I felt insanely alert and focused as my skis slid over the snow. When the visibility is bad, my hearing becomes magnified, so each heartbeat within me sounds like a drum. People might think skiing in this environment is risky, but actually its quite tame.

As we headed back I was wincing in pain. My blisters had ruptured and were raw flesh. According to the BMC they are the most common condition Mountain Guides request information on. I hobbled around deck and one of the other skiers who was a doctor helped me treat them. We travelled another 137km to Liedefjorden. It was a bummer as next day I couldn't go out and the weather was amazing so I felt gutted.

DAWN TILL TUSK

My favourite day was probably when Origo dropped us off in Sjurgreen and we made our way 14km over the peninsula to get picked up from Magdalena fjorden. The first bit was a slog through moraine for about 30 minutes, then we roped up to move along the tidal glacier. We discovered a big hole midway, created by a huge boulder and we all stood in a circle peering in, till we realised we were on a precarious snow bridge.

We backtracked round the glacier and toured up a ramp to a col, before heading down a couloir. As we skied along a flat section for as long as we could, I was acutely aware of my happiness. The best moments of my existence are in these places. We poled along another gradual slope and finally popped out into a different valley where we could see Origo again. We had a blast that evening skiing on the beach, watching the northernmost colony of harbour seals and climbing a precarious iceberg.

Next morning in Forlansundet we heard Vera running around on deck at 6am, as she'd spotted a colony of walrus. We anchored up and headed ashore to sit with these curious creatures that look from a distance like rocks piled on top of each other. Their beady eyes give them away. They jab each other with their bright white tusks every now and then while omitting an occasional roar. Skiing that day was an 8km loop on Prins Karls Forland island which is its own national park and is 87km long and 11km wide. The jutting alpine mountains are interspersed with wild glaciers.

Of course the trip wouldn't have been complete without the obligatory tourist trip to the deserted Russian coalmining community, Pyramiden. It's eerie walking around this ghost town while gawping at these large abandoned buildings created and then cast aside by the human race. A sort of sadness started to infiltrate our group. We all were aware our time was coming to an end.



Polar bears: a thrill to see them, but only at a safe distance



Walrus numbers have been increasing on Svalbard in recent years



Cruising down Brokerbreen to the fjord

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The team crossed polar bear tracks while climbing Glopbein in sunshine

“If we don’t watch out the North Pole will be open water in my lifetime, and icebergs will only be seen in photographs.”

I know it was only a short time away, but I felt different. I wasn’t the shy teenager with few words to express himself anymore, as I had been at that first dinner. On the final day we sat in a circle on a beach, taking it in turns to sum up our experiences and I could genuinely say this was the best trip of my life. I felt I’d found soulmates; adults that would be my friends forever. We were all emotional as we thanked Vera and the team for allowing us to experience this amazing place. We mustn’t ever lose it because if we don’t watch out the North Pole will be open water in my lifetime, and icebergs will only be seen in photographs. I took a deep breath as I looked across the mountains and vowed to keeping fighting as a crusader for Protect Our Winters, so that we tackle global warming head on and look after this beautiful kingdom of the polar bear. ■ T&M

Tybalt is supported by Berghaus (www.berghaus.com) and is a crusader for POW (www.protectourwinters.org)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



TYBALT PEAKE

Tybalt is a freeride skier, climber and mountaineer, and the youngest person to have sailed the North West Passage. Follow him at www.tybaltpeake.com

SVALBARD – A GUIDE’S VIEW

British Mountain Guide **Bruce Goodlad** gives his take on Svalbard

As a Guide, I have been lucky enough to ski, climb and guide all over the world. Last year I visited Svalbard for the first time; it offers some unique opportunities and some unique challenges. If you asked me to sum it up in one phrase I’d say it is Antarctica in miniature (though it is the size of Belgium), with two daily flights from mainland Europe.

As a Guide, Svalbard is all about skiing, scenery and wildlife. Skiing with a backdrop of glaciers dropping into the Arctic Ocean is a unique place to ski and explore. The wildlife does pose it’s own hazard; Svalbard and Greenland are the only places I have ski toured with a rifle on me at all times for polar bear protection. While bears are hunted by the Inuit in Greenland, which makes them more wary of humans, they are protected in Svalbard so you need to be on your guard at all times.

There are two options for ski touring in Svalbard: land-based or using a boat as a base. Both give amazing opportunities, but if you are land-based you need to set bear alarm trip wires and have a guard awake on look-out all night. If you stay on a boat then you can relax at night, but you need to scrutinise the landing site prior to leaving the boat. Have your rifle ready, then leave the beach as quickly as possible. On return you need to make sure your pick-up is ready, then carefully look for signs of bear round the pick-up area before skiing down to the beach and getting into the boat – a new style of guiding for me. Whatever you choose to do in Svalbard, I would encourage anyone to go there and experience this unique and magical wilderness.

More info: www.mountainadventurecompany.com



Don't forget your rifle!

MS Origo provided a base from which to explore Svalbard



THE KNOWLEDGE

Svalbard

The essential info to know before you go

■ WHEN TO GO:

Winter temperatures in Svalbard are up to 20°C (36°F) higher than similar latitudes in Russia and Canada, with the warm Atlantic water keeping the surrounding waters open and navigable most of the year. However, the best time to visit Svalbard for ski touring is in June/July.

■ HOW TO GET THERE:

Svalbard Airport, Longyear, located 3 kilometres (2 mi) from Longyearbyen, is the only airport

offering air transport off the archipelago. Scandinavian Airlines has daily scheduled services from Tromsø and Oslo. Low-cost carrier Norwegian Air Shuttle also has a service between Oslo and Svalbard, operating three or four times a week. Svalbard is not part of the Schengen area, so passports must be brought by all non-Norwegian visitors

■ HOW TO GET AROUND:

Although there are roads within settlements, there are no roads connecting towns, so travel is by

either snowmobile or by boat.

■ WHERE TO STAY:

Tybalt stayed in a dormitory at Guesthouse 102 in Longyearbyen. The rate was 330 NOK per night with breakfast. www.gjestehuset102.no/en.html

■ NATURE AND WILDLIFE:

Polar bears are the iconic symbol of Svalbard, and one of the main tourist attractions. While protected, anyone outside of settlements is recommended to carry a firearm to kill polar bears in self-defence, as a last resort, should they attack, and is required to have appropriate means of frightening and chasing

off polar bears. Svalbard has permafrost and tundra, with both low, middle and high Arctic vegetation. 165 species of plants have been found on the archipelago. Only those areas which defrost in the summer have vegetation, which accounts for about 10% of the archipelago

■ WHO TO GO WITH:

The author travelled with Vega Expeditions (www.vegaexpeditions.com) who are offering the trip again in 2017. Companies offering a complete package including flights are Jagged Globe (www.jagged-globe.co.uk) and Adventure Alternative (www.adventurealternative.com).