

Svalbard

A cold but impressive expedition

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The arctic is not the first destination you will think about when planning a dive trip. Many divers from all over the world choose (sub)tropical destinations because of it's colourfull flora and fauna. The adventurer who dares to go to the most northern part of the world will encounter a unique aquatic world.

The trip to the islands of Svalbard will go through Norway. There are regular flights to Svalbard starting in Oslo or Tromsø. The best time to travel to Svalbard is june – august. Besides these months the climate is extremely cold and dark.

During the summer the sun stays up 24 hours a day. The sun just makes circles above you but will not drop. The average temperature during the summer time is 6 degrees Celsius. Not really comparable with the climate on a tropical island, but it's not too bad with a warm shirt and a pair of gloves.

A visit to Svalbard will start with one or more days in Longyearbuyen. This is only a small village although this is the capital of Svalbard. There are 4 hotels/pensions, some restaurants and cafe's and a small

shopping centre were you can get almost everything you need.

The buildings are mostly build from wood and painted in beautifull, typically Norwegian, colours. Svalbard is covered with a thick pack of snow almost all year around. This makes that almost all houses are build high above the ground. The ground is always frozen. This is why electricity and water lines are built above the ground. On first sight this looks strange; but the harsh climate during winter time leaves no other way..

It's best to book a trip on the "Professor Molchanov" when you want to go diving at the Arctic. The Professor Molchanov is a modern and comfortable oceanographic research vessel. The vessel was build in Finland in 1983. The vessel is operated by an enthusiast Russian crew, all highly experienced in ice navigation. It is chartered by the dutch company "Ocean Wide Expeditions".

This vessel is used to make (diving) tours to the arctic and antarctic. The "Professor Molchanov" is an ice-strengthened vessel. This means that it's not really an ice-



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Two Zodiacs are available to bring the divers to the dive sites.





breaker but capable of sailing through a meter of ice. The size of the vessel and its ice capabilities make it possible to enter the fjords of Svalbard very deeply. The tours to the arctic on the vessel last one week. Diving is only offered two weeks a year. The vessel has room for 52 guests, only 16 of them can be divers. This gives a mixture of naturalists, bird watchers and divers on board.

The international expedition leaders and guides are highly knowledgeable, helpful and dedicated to the protection of the environment.

Diving trips around Svalbard are true expeditions. A plan of the tour is made in advance. But divers and

other passengers have to be flexible since ice and weather conditions influence the route the vessel will sail. The actual program of the expedition will vary to take the best advantage of local conditions, spontaneous opportunities and wildlife.

The dive sites that will be visited are not all exactly known in advance. This gives way to very explorative diving on sites where no one has ever dived before.

The very experienced expedition leader has the goal to show you as many different animals that live around the snowy islands as possible. Chances are that he will show you polar bears, walruses, seals, whales

and belugas. We have seen all of these animals. Sometimes not very near, but we have seen them; so don't forget your binoculars.

An average day on board of the "Professor Molchanov" is quite busy. Breakfast is being served around eight in the morning. A minimum of two tours a day will be organised by the expedition leader. These can either be a land based tour or a dive trip for the divers that are on board. For the divers it's always hard to make a choice, go diving or make a land tour. Both are very beautiful.

The north pole doesn't consist of land as opposed to the antarctic. The Arctic is a huge area. There is

no clear agreement on its extent, no simple geographical or even political definition of its territory.

Fact is that the most northern part of the world is covered with ice. This ice will melt during the summer and will freeze up during the winter.

In august it's possible to circumvent the islands of Svalbard, in early summer this is not possible. One of the goals in sailing the "Professor Molchanov" is to get as northern as possible. We reached the pack ice at around 80 degrees. From there on it was impossible to sail further north bound.



Diving at the Arctic, Svalbard

Diving at the arctic is an impressive experience. Because the dangers of moving ice, diving at the arctic is only possible for a few months per year. Every day two different dives sites are picked by the expedition leader and the dive guides. These sites are not known in advance, as the exact route of the vessel is not known in advance. Sometimes you dive at sites where no one ever dived before. For a couple of dives the sites are just picked on good luck and depths of the sea floor. There is always an element of the unexpected.

Two Zodiacs will bring the divers to the dive sites. You don't have to carry your gear around, just put it in the zodiacs which are located on the big deck. The zodiacs are then hoisted into the water.

Only experienced dry suit divers, with at least 20 logged dry suit dives, can join the tour. Your gear will be checked by the dive guides. You will at least need two regulators, consisting of a first and second stage. A maximum number of five hoses is allowed. The first dive is the traditional check-up dive. This will be at an easy place where all

equipment is tested for the rest of the week. The water temperature is around 0 degrees Celsius. Therefore good preparation of your gear and warm undergarment is needed here.

The underwater world of the Arctic is very varied. Most of the the dive sites feature enormous kelp plants. Between the kelp a lot of critters can be found, which can be: small fish, amphipods, small swimming nudibranchs, sea-slugs, nudibranchs, sea urchins, hermit-crabs, starfish, spidercrabs and a lot more. Other dive sites show a different sight. A rocky sea bed, which at first seems desolated, forms the basis of this part the northern ice sea. On these rocky surfaces a lot of colourful anemones and sea dahlia's can be found.

Be prepared, on many of the dive sites you will experience enormous swells. These swells are noticeable on to about 10 meters below the surface. The swells combined with diving through the kelp-forests makes the dives very special. At the end of the dive you will wonder: "was it the kelp or the sea floor that was moving?"

You will sail through the ice all week. Big icebergs will float by. An ice dive along one of these

enormous blocks of ice must be part of the tour. The crew will search for an iceberg that has landed on the sea floor. This way you are sure the ice will not tilt while the divers are underwater. The iceberg also has to be reasonable free of other blocks of ice. Moving ice can close the open water making your ascent impossible.

A bit of sun light will make the underwater scenery even more beautiful. Some icebergs are almost jade coloured, making you forget the coldness of the water.

Close encounters with seals are possible for snorklers. During our tour a group of seals was located northern of Prince Karls Forlandet. They were living at a place where the water was only 1,5 metre deep. Some of them were lying on the rock's, others were playing around in the water. The animals are not shy at all and you can approach them very closely. Now you can take pictures of them using a wide angle lens. Shots that are impossible for the photographers on land who were following us with their big tele lenses.

The best dive site is called "Saga-Reef". This is one of the sites that are more or less guaranteed to



be visited during the tour. This dive will be the last dive of the trip and will be made during the way back to Longyearbyen.

Saga-reef is a very complete reference of all there is to see while diving at the arctic. The first 8 meters are covered with enormous kelp forests. From 8 meters down you can find a wall that leads you into deeper waters. Across this wall you can find a lot of marine life: anemones, sea dalia's in different colours make you think you're in the tropics. Each kelp plant houses a spider crab, which are very abundant at this site. Saga reef proves that diving at the arctic can be as impressive as diving in the tropics.

Land based tours

It's sometimes hard to decide whether to go on a land tour or to go diving when you are at Svalbard. A walk across the tundra is definitely worth while. In spring and early summer the tundra's flora is starting to develop. Grasses are starting to grow and flowers start to blossom. The fresh grass makes the



reindeer wander across the tundra.

The main reason for going to the arctic is the search for animals that are unique for this part of the world. Every day is spent searching for polar bears, walrusse, seals, beluga's etc. During one of our searches for a polar bear we were surprised by a group of White Beluga's.

The scenery at the arctic is overwhelming. You will see lots of stunning landscapes, icebergs and big glaciers. The guides will always carry guns during diving and land tours. Polar bears are quite abundant and you don't want a very close encounter with them. The guns will only be used for protection. As the Polar Bear is a protected animal, active hunting is forbidden.

We have seen some polar bears, unfortunately not close by. The expedition leader told us that the bears sometimes come so close that they are leaning against the vessel.

The island of Møffen is very famous for its population of walrusse. The animals at Møffen are protected and you are not allowed to come closer than 300 meters. But with a little bit of luck another group of these animals is found outside

this area. You'll be surprised by the size of these animals. When approaching a group of walrusse carefullness is required. The water is a safe haven for the animals. This means that you should never be between the walrusse and the open water. The animals are not really afraid and seem quite tame. It's key that you don't make any unexpected movements. The captain was even able to manoeuvre the vessel against some floating pieces of ice with sleeping walrusse on them.

Some places on Svalbard remind us of the long history of the islands. Examples of these places are Smeerenburg with the remnants of a dutch whaling station and Danskoya an old danish whaling station. These two deserted whaling stations are very close to the area from which adventurers tried to reach the North Pole for the first time. The foundations of the barracks of one of these expeditions can still be found.

Barentsburg, which is the only remaining Russian city on Svalbard will be visited at the last day of the tour. The people in this city live from the last remaining mines on the island. After this visit the boat is going back to Longyearbyen. For some this is the time to leave Svalbard. But if you want you can stay a few days more to enjoy the flowers, plants and birds of the main island.

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