

Arctic Treasure - A Tour Report from Wild Images' Svalbard (Spitsbergen) Classic Tour in August 2020

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When talented art photographer couple Duncan Phillips and Irene Amiet joined our Spitsbergen Classic tour in August, we were already excited to see what they may come back with. Needless to say we were enthralled by their photos of their journey. Here, they share their experiences in the icy realms of the sea ice around Spitsbergen.

Arctic Treasure – Irene Amiet

Having lived and breathed the dusty savannahs and sultry rainforests of Africa and South America, digging our fingers into the red soils and crumbly clay, we found ourselves at the edge of the world this summer, in an unfamiliar environment, hostile to all but a few; cold, barren, tree-less, and utterly enthralling: The Arctic

Travel this year has been a lucky draw, but we managed to land in Svalbard mid-August, free to embark the MS Origo – a 40-metre expedition ship originally built in 1955 – for a ten-day journey in search of all the seas and lands Svalbard would disclose.

The passengers on this trip were wildlife enthusiasts and photographers from all walks of life, with different styles and perspectives, but a shared passion. An understanding of each other's wishes and the patience that comes with that built a great foundation for a successful trip and friendships that will last into the future.

The expedition was guided by two multiple award-winning photographers, both polar experts, zoologists, conservationists and perfect hosts.

Leaving Longyearbyen, an old coal-mining town with a high street comprising no more than ten buildings, we were soon out of wifi reach and phone signal, chugging past a backdrop of pointy mountains, just as Svalbard's original name "Spitzbergen" proclaims. Eternal ice and fresh snow cap the triangular shapes amongst which the sea-birds circle in a cacophony of haunting caws and shrieks, only to glide over the water on their wing-tips, above an ocean interchanging between forbidding slate grey and sheer emerald gauze.

On board our ship, we were led into a new story called by its illustrations of amethyst hues against aquamarine, the writing penned in crystal, and all the while the waves of an angry sea lapped at the book's corners to make the tale that much more precious.

The first night, the landscape was bathed in direct light, the midnight sun stretching the golden hour from ten o'clock to two in the morning. Puffins would whirl past the ship and glaciers dropped into the sea to both sides. It was too stunning to think of sleep.

The concept of time became distorted in Svalbard. The sun never set and night and day became a confusion, the time of day lost its importance.

When we reached open waters, the sea made us feel quite small quite quickly. It took some of the passengers a day to find their sea-legs and the ones prone to motion-sickness were grateful to have packed their medication. On deck, one had to hold on to the railing as if tied to a rolling, see-sawing carnival ride, but the fascination of the angry spouts of spray and barrelling grey waves cast a spell of their own.

We were northward bound on a mission, to the drift-ice which had receded now in August, but where we hoped to photograph polar bears on ice.

Patience is a pillar of nature and wildlife photography, and even though the seas calmed once we reached the pack-ice, the fog was thick. Hour upon hour we pushed northward, breaking through ice, watching the flash of the cracking slabs with fish rushing out of their frozen cages, seemingly the only living organisms in this misty fringe. We reached 82.11 degree north -545 miles from the north pole. No polar

bear in sight.

That's when a crew's experience kicks in. Consulting ice-charts and maps, a new plan was put in action and we turned the ship's bow by 45 degrees to make for another rim of drift-ice south-east. There we struck gold.

When the sun finally broke through the haze, it was nothing short of breath-taking. Far into the horizon the pack-ice drifted in a white honeycombed pattern interspersed by turquoise and cobalt, and in the midst of this white wonderland, we found the bears.

Curious, the young male circled our ship at a safe distance, posing and parading to the incessant shutters of cameras. After a few hours of mutual observation, he lay down for a nap.

We had our hearty but delicious dinner prepared and served by a crew who was just as excited about the sighting as we were, leading to a camaraderie of high spirits that lasted beyond the trip.

At around 9pm, with the sun entering the golden zone, we embarked on zodiacs to revisit the bear. The next four hours went by in a dream.

Polar ice makes for fantastic natural frames or thrones of ice for a polar king.

There are moments afloat in our minds, not yet understood or comprehended, like the drifting sea ice in the fog; moments we can't quite grasp or catch. When the light ripped through the blanket of clouds and disclosed a world of which we had no inkling, the need to immerse ourselves in these new sensations was acute, but the arctic environment and its protagonists hold us at arm's length. In this polar wilderness we can't trespass, except with manmade tools or boats that ferry us through, where we can't obtain or even touch. Our limitations are akin to a pain, an ache, but the same cracks this lack of access cause in us are healed by the sheer beauty of the knowledge that not everything is ours to hold, that there are secrets yet to discover.

After midnight, the young polar bear went to sleep once more on his frozen float on the edge of the pack ice, drifting off into twilight, nestled on its side, curled against the rising wind, his eyes closed, ready to persevere against the elements and the winds of change.

The haunting visual was even more profound as photographing the arctic's treasures wasn't our only focus, but we wanted to learn about conservation issues. Polar bears race the great melting of drift ice, caused by climate change, to adapt their feeding habits. Additionally, their numbers are decimated through unsustainable hunting practices and an, as yet, still legal fur-trade, which costs up to a 1000 bears their lives each year, more than the species can reproduce. Ole Jørgen Liodden, one of our guides and former wildlife photographer of the year has dedicated much of his recent years to polar bear research in order to convince various authorities to curb hunting and ban the trade. His lectures were educational, concise and poignant in view of the animals and the habitat we got to experience around us.

More about this pressing issue here : <http://oleliodden.com/images/projects/polar-bears-and-humans/polar-bears-humans-the-book/>

Back around Svalbard the next day, we spotted a polar bear on shore and instantly boarded zodiacs to follow his rambling path as he trudged across rain-glazed stones and tree trunk flotsam that had washed up. He'd occasionally sniff at our direction, but wander on his solitary paws unfazed, a lonesome figure in a dramatic landscape.

In nature, the haunting, the surprising and the sweet go hand-in-hand, even on an arctic expedition.

We'd leave a bear to be greeted by Pomeranian skewers or a walrus diving for air next to the zodiac; a water-monster of Greek mythology with a breath pungent of fish and a body covered in scraps and barnacles.

Next we'd be spell-bound by two arctic foxes at play, chasing each other up and down a beach, the cameras trained at their every antic of faux attacks and chasing the tail.

Svalbard has a new surprise waiting inside every fjord. Gargantuan glaciers drop into the sea, transporting us to the ruins of a glass palace succumbed to time, shattered into a million shards of ice like a gigantic broken mirror from which the light reflects and bounces skywards, touching every bird and every mountain tip. The rims of the icebergs are the melting gilded frames that once hung on the palace walls but now drip their metallic glow into the sea. The demolished pillars and archways form a new, open-ceiling edifice, built from deepest cobalt to purple and alabaster. We could hear the working ice's constant crackling as we made our way through.

The Kittywake's wings become translucent against the fading sun, the feathers blend into the soft light. The ice they rest on is a study in texture, of marbled and pressurised time-lines, thousands of years trapped in frozen water. Sun rays dance in front of the stark mountains, only the tips brushed in roseate.

In the midst of this shrine of glacial beauty swims the harbour seal, popping up and diving, like a jester looking for his court to come and play.

In such an inspiring environment, we both found it important to photograph the animals by showing them as part of their habitat, and were sometimes happiest with images that encourage the viewer to hunt with the eye to find the subject. With infrared photography this game of hide and seek can be exaggerated.

The bearded seal, meanwhile, is the old wise man, resting on his slab of ice, content to observe and conserve his energy.

Svalbard is the home to the famous bird cliff of the guillemots of Alkefjellet. Guillemot chicks have to tumble thirty metres or more into the water before they're ready to fly, encouraged by their squawking parents who are anxious their young won't miss the long annual migration to Greenland each summer. The skies are abuzz with the wings of sea-birds, guillemots and predating gulls or the haunting call of a loon.

On a different morning, we entered a bay where a polar bear was sleeping high on a cliff, most likely digesting a meal, a small ivory furball in the expanse of the mountainous terrain next to a glacier. A fresh stream had formed a polished channel through the ice and a waterfall dripped across the edge, making for lovely light effects and some adventurous explorations by the ledge.

For photographs, it's often the details that have to stand for the whole larger than life canvas of Svalbard.

Our ship kept following the sun to get the best experience out of our ten days. The course was set according to the weather forecast and so we had an abundance of sunlight despite some arctic lows chasing us astern.

The sun set for the first time in Svalbard in months when we landed close to a colony of walrus. Lounging in front of a glacier, these sabre-toothed animals mustered as much grace between them as a mountain of potato sacks, exuding an almost pastoral sense of calm.

By unseen queue, they rushed into motion in a surprising show of speed and flopped and rolled themselves into the sea, the backlit spray sparkling above them, to adorn even these most massif of sea-dwelling mammals with a sprinkling of grace.

And in these last streams of sunlight, when summer gently glided into autumn, a sheen seemed to thin, and this polar world was almost attainable, made us part of it, for a short moment only, but long enough for us to be forever entranced.

The hope remains that the people fighting for this fragile eco-system and its precious inhabitants will prevail and one of the last true wildernesses will remain untamed, to let us know we are not master of all.

We both take away a treasure chest of memories, experiences and new inspiration and are guaranteed to return north.

An Introduction to Infrared Photography – Duncan Phillips:

In the ten days we travelled the sun never set. For Duncan Phillips who specialises in infrared photography, this lower sun angle and the resulting deepening shadows created a main interest. In monochrome, textures begin to rise from the background while highlights and shadows are increased, but there is no warm light, the eye is drawn by other concerns. Sometimes it's this black and white reduction of an area that brings forth its core character.

Depending on the spectrum of the infrared filter, the sky can suddenly change drastically, clouds visible to the eye can disappear to let other layers emerge, creating complex patterns of artistically drawn swathes and swirls of saturation in the sky.

Backlit subjects are challenging in infrared, but when successful the strength of the silhouettes and flashes of highlights can appear very dramatic.

When portraying the same animal in infrared black and white, texture and forms become the leaders of any composition, the distraction of colour fades to give way to the nuanced play of soft and hard substances. The eye is led by shadows and reflected light.

With infrared photography, foliage and grasses turn brilliant white and blue skies become inky black, often creating a scene reminiscent of moonlight, when in fact it's taken at midday.