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Norway

# Extreme North

Polar bears, ice fields, forbidding cliffs. Welcome to Arctic Circle yachting. **Rob Buchanan** sets sail for the island of Spitsbergen, the North Pole's nearest neighbor



Rock star: Italian climbing guide Michele Maggioni in Songfjorden, on Spitsbergen's northeast coast



Cruising's cutting edge: The *Pelagic Australis*, arguably the world's finest high-latitude charter yacht, sleeps 12.

I'M WALKING DOWN AN EMPTY STREET IN A CITY I'VE never seen before. Or, rather, I'm trying to walk. Every few steps, some giant unseen hand begins to push against me until, strain as I might, I eventually grind to a halt. Then, a moment later, the hand releases me and I go reeling forward, barely able to keep my feet.

It's strangely exhilarating, this lurching promenade, but as soon as I start to enjoy it, I wake up—not in an alien city but in a narrow bunk in a

Photographs by Rob Buchanan



tiny room lit by a single skylight. There's an odd sound of liquid running over metal, and through a doorway an odd sight: a red scarecrow swinging slowly back and forth.

And then it dawns on me: This room is my cabin on board a 74-foot expedition sailboat named the *Pelagic Australis*. That gurgling is the frigid Barents Sea, somewhere north of Norway, and the scarecrow is my foul-weather gear, hung on a hook and rocked by the ocean swell—the cosmic hand of my dream. Pulling on my sea-boots, I clamber up the companionway to the pilothouse, a combination observation lounge, indoor steering post, and navigation station. There I find our English skipper, Rich Haworth, poring over a chart of the Arctic, and two Italian clients and crewmates—Michele Maggioni, a mountain guide, and Augusto Vevey, a forest ranger—flipping through old climbing magazines. Even though it's 3 A.M., the sun is still high. At this latitude, 73 degrees north, it won't set until August 10, three weeks from now, and where we're headed—to 80 degrees north and beyond, if the ice permits—not until August 24.

Rich looks up from his chart to fiddle with the GPS. In about 18

Ettore nods and offers me a Marlboro, then lights one himself. We watch a pair of graceful albatrosslike fulmars glide in from the east, circle under the bow, and settle on the water, tidily folding their wings. Behind us, our wake traces a sinuous path back toward Europe, except that Europe is gone now, beyond the horizon.

"My first time at sea," Ettore says pensively. "For me, it is very emotional. . . . I don't even want to make a photograph. I am just relaxing and trying to remember how it is"—he taps his head—"in here."

"So what's that for?" I ask, gesturing at the video camera lying beside him.

He smiles. "That is for my wife, who thinks I am in Las Vegas."

MANY AMERICANS HAVE NEVER heard of Spitsbergen. Once, after I explained the details—an island about the size of Taiwan that lies east of Greenland, north of Norway, and less than 600 miles from the North Pole—a friend said, "Oh, yeah, where Santa lives."

The name, which means "sharp, pointed mountains," was bestowed by Willem Barents, a Dutch navigator who discovered this largest member of the Svalbard archipelago in 1596, while returning from an unsuccessful expedition in search of a sea route to the Orient.

Barents was followed by a rush of whalers who hunted many species virtually to extinction. Later came Russian and Norwegian hunters and trappers in search of walruses, bears, and foxes, and then, in the twentieth century, polar explorers, coal miners, and a particular breed of cold-hardy tourist.

What has made the place accessible to them all is a geographical quirk: At Spitsbergen's latitude, most land is permanently icebound. But thanks to a wayward tendril of the Gulf Stream, the island's west coast is generally ice-free all summer, and after July, usually its north coast too.

"Nowhere else in the world can a small, unstrengthened vessel safely reach so high a latitude," wrote the English sailor and

mountaineer H. W. Tilman in 1974, "so that for anyone with the urge to penetrate remote regions, preferably mountainous, Spitzbergen is a powerful magnet and an obvious objective."

Such forces have drawn 12 of us to this particular expedition. Besides Rich, his two paid hands, Dion Poncet and Alec Hazell, and me, there is a group of eight climbing enthusiasts from northern Italy: a charismatic patent lawyer, Maria-cristina Rapisardi, and her husband, Giovanni

Cristofori, a doctor; Pierre Sicouri, a commodities trader, and his wife, Paola, a museum fund-raiser; the aforementioned Ettore, Michele, and Augusto; and the man who will emerge as our chef and court jester, Michele di Giorgio, a dance impresario and restaurateur.

In addition to helping with the sailing, cooking, and cleanup chores, we're each paying \$7,000 for two weeks aboard what is arguably the world's finest high-latitude charter yacht, which sports a racy but ultra-strong aluminum hull, 255-horsepower diesel, and lifting keel—a huge advantage for navigating uncharted, sometimes shallow waters. And while the *Pelagic Australis's* appointments aren't quite luxurious—there are, for instance, just two toilets—it has a full complement of expedition toys: two 14-foot inflatable dinghies, climbing gear, skis, a dive compressor and tanks, and an Internet communications suite for film production and live-image transmission. And, crucially for the Italians, the saloon table seats all 12 of us with ease.

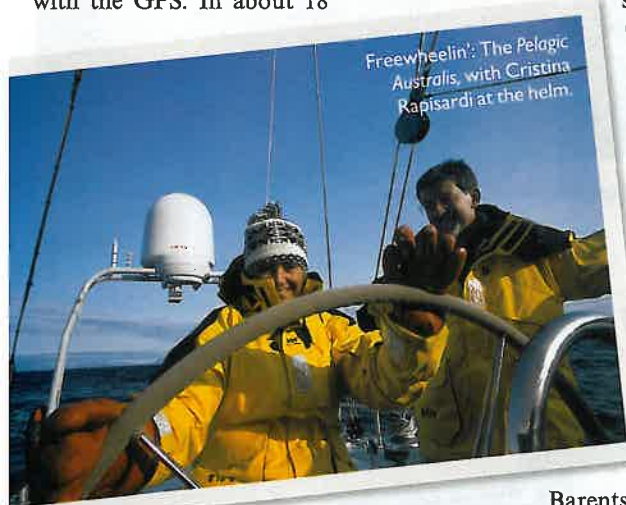
**W**HEN I FLY INTO TROMSØ, Norway—our point of departure—the *Pelagic Australis* is the biggest, shiniest thing in the harbor and the object of much local curiosity. A day later the Italians arrive, Michele di Giorgio and Augusto in an SUV they've driven all the way from Italy stuffed with pasta, polenta, *parmigiano*, and climbing gear.

Rich gives us a safety briefing and then, quite unnecessarily, points out the poster of a blood-covered polar bear taped to the bulkhead. "It attacks without warning," the caption reads. "*Keep your distance!*"

"We won't be going ashore without the Remington," he says, referring to the ship's .375-caliber rifle. "In any event, we can't—it's the law."

And with that, we cast off our mooring

**It is a powerfully primeval scene: the cold sea breaking at the foot of the cliffs, the mists forming and fleeing, the birds screaming**



hours, he tells us, we'll reach Bjørnøya, a 12-mile-long slab of tundra and sea cliff and the most remote island in the Arctic. From there, another day's sail north should bring us to the ultimate object of our voyage, the mountainous, glaciated, and fjord-riven island of Spitsbergen. Awaiting us there is an Ice Age tableau of polar bears, mist-shrouded peaks, and enormous ice fields.

In the meantime, we've got 250 miles of ocean to cross. "Anyone fancy a cup of tea?" Rich asks. He taps a button on the autopilot and ducks into the galley. I step out from the main hatch into the open air of the cockpit, where Ettore Togni, a mountain guide from Lombardy, is basking in the midnight sun.



lines and head north. Our plan is simple: touch at Bear Island, sail on to Spitsbergen and, if possible, circumnavigate it, stopping here and there to explore glaciers and bag peaks. "Why go by sailboat?" people ask. "What is there to do on a long passage?" The answer is, everything—and nothing. Peruse admiralty charts. Stare at other vessels through binoculars. Take a picture if the light is right. The voyage provides its own narrative, and for me, at least, that's good enough.

**A** DAY LATER, BJØRNØYA, OR Bear Island, rises in the mist, its forbidding cliffs and jagged sea stacks lending an aura of fierce impregnability. We anchor at a semicircular cove backed by soaring vertical walls. Six of us clamber aboard one of the inflatable dinghies and putt south along the foot of Fuglefjellet, a massive 1,400-foot-high wall that runs three miles to the southern tip of the island.

Fuglefjellet is said to be one of the finest bird breeding grounds in the Northern Hemisphere, and I can well believe it. The biggest colonies, close to a million pairs each, are those of the small, shrieky gulls called kittiwakes and of Brunnich's guillemots, agile divers but terrible flyers that, when young, leave the nest by throwing themselves off the cliffs. There are also legions of little auks, eight inches tall, and parrot-billed, bumblebee-fat puffins.

Each fold in the coastline seems to reveal a bigger and more dramatic amphitheater, its walls stacked with nesting birds and the air filled with wheeling ones. It is a powerfully primeval scene: the cold sea relentlessly breaking at the foot of the cliffs, the mists forming and fleeing, the birds screaming. The noise level is unbelievable. I keep expecting it to drop a notch or two as the birds settle in for the night, until it occurs to me that there isn't going to be a night. Not for another month anyway.

On our return, Rich relays some alarming news. In a radio conversation with the small Norwegian weather base at the north end of the island, he's learned that earlier in the spring a female polar bear and two cubs remained on Bjørnøya rather than drifting north with the retreating pack ice. Now they're trapped. No ice means nowhere to rest and nothing to eat—seals, the staple of the polar bear diet, typically live on and under the pack ice—and the cubs could never make the 140-mile open-water swim to Spitsbergen, the nearest piece of solid ground.

Later, I find this tidbit on Bjørnøya in a guidebook and read it aloud: "In the winter there may be a hundred bears on the island. Should there be any left during the summer,

they are usually crazed with hunger."

Rich smiles. "So it's the Remington for you tomorrow, eh?" he says.

AFTER BREAKFAST THE NEXT "morning," we land at a little cove called Kvalrossbutka, or Walrus Bay, with the aim of hiking to Russehamna, or Russian Harbor, about two miles north. That Kvalrossbutka had once been the site of a whaling works is obvious, not only from the rusting blubber boilers that sit at water's edge but also from the profusion of giant bones—whale pelvises—that lie around in a state of near-perfect preservation.

We wander cautiously up the grassy hillside while Augusto, our designated Marine, practices with the Remington. The target bullets don't seem to fit the weapon, so he fires a live round instead—one of just six that we have—at a two-liter plastic bottle set on a rock about 50 yards away. He misses, but Ettore pronounces it a "close miss." Somewhat less than reassured, we set off up the coast.

Here and there I bend to scan items of interest, always with one eye peeled for a crazed polar bear. "Remember, you don't have to be faster than the bear," Alec told me with a grin as he dropped us on the beach that morning. "You just have to be faster than one of the Italians."

One place the bears won't be hiding is in the shrubbery, for throughout the entire Svalbard archipelago there is neither tree nor bush. The one woody species, polar willow, grows only to a height of two and a half inches, and even after 100 years may have a crown of just five or six leaves. Yet the tundra is not without beauty. This is perfect walking country, springy green and dotted with arctic poppies, moss campion, and purple saxifrage.

An hour later, descending to the double cove of Russehamna, we find an old cabin stocked with sleeping bags, food, and a radio—a weekend retreat, apparently, for the staff of the weather base ten miles away. Dion says that it reminds him of a place on South Georgia Island near Antarctica called the Love Shack, where amorous researchers go for some privacy.

While we pore over the logbook, hoping for salacious nuggets (difficult to find, given that most of the entries are in Norwegian), Augusto warily patrols the perimeter. In a nearby creek bed he discovers several suspiciously large droppings. They're fresh.

Not until Alec runs the dinghy in to meet us an hour later does the mood lighten. With our escape pod standing by, we turn to beachcombing—I find a half-full bottle of Russian vodka, its label faded but not quite



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gone—and then a spirited game of boccie contested with scavenged fishing floats. For all of Svalbard's wildness, its beaches are chockablock with flotsam and jetsam. Everything that ever fell or got pitched into a Russian river, it seems, winds up here.

We never do see the bears. But strangely or not, once we're safely back on board the *Pelagic Australis*, a sort of collective meat-lust comes over us. Rich goes to the forepeak—the unheated sail locker that doubles as a walk-in cooler—and returns with a reindeer rump he bought in Tromsø.

"Normally, being English, I would just bung this into the oo-ven," he says in his Lancashire accent. "But if any of you have any ideas..."

There's a hurried conference. Michele di Giorgio reaches for the meat. "Please, I have the ideas."

Rich laughs. "Works every time."

THE FIRST ICEBERG TO CROSS OUR path isn't big—just the size of an SUV—but it's interestingly sculpted and a vivid blue. I rush to the rail to take a picture, which is idiotic because within an hour we're surrounded by hundreds more—massive chunks that have calved off an ice field called Brepollen, at the head of the Hornsund fjord.

It's the morning of the fourth day, and we're just off the southern tip of Spitsbergen. Mariacristina, who goes by Cristina, takes the helm as we enter the Hornsund, pounding into the teeth of a brutal 30-knot wind. Every now and then there's a hideous thumping noise as we collide with barrel-sized "growlers" and smaller bits of berg.

Cristina and Giovanni have been sailing

all their lives, but neither is interested in the Mediterranean's showy big-boat scene. Instead, they're having their own boat built in England, a 74-foot Oyster—the Rolls-Royce of the yachting world. "I'm fifty-one," Cristina says. "I hope when I'm sixty I will be working less, spending four months a year on the boat. We want to see the world—especially the cold places."

One issue for the couple is finding a reliable captain, and Cristina makes no effort to hide her interest in hiring Rich.

"I used to be normal, up till five years ago," Rich says, explaining his decision to leave a lucrative engineering job for the sea.

Cristina smiles. "I want to be abnormal too," she says.

Ten miles up the Hornsund, we turn into a south-forking arm of the fjord. There is not a breath of wind and the water is a sheet of glass with only some distant kittiwakes fishing for shrimp at a river mouth. Michele di Giorgio climbs into one of the dinghies and leaps onto an iceberg, drawing stern glances from the two guides. He returns with a beach ball-sized ice cube to chill our cocktails.

Exiting the Hornsund, we turn north toward Spitsbergen's "capital," the old coal-mining settlement of Longyearbyen. An hour later, we're in pea-soup fog and then ice—thick ice. Now it doesn't seem so beautiful, but instead vaguely threatening.

We turn back south and then head west, hoping to skirt the trouble, when Rich notices a shape on his radar screen moving steadily north to south, slicing directly through the tongue of ice no more than a quarter of a mile away. It's the SS *Endeavor*, a 100-passenger cruise ship bound for Tromsø. After a brief radio conversation, the *Endeavor*'s captain offers to turn back north and clear a short channel for us.

A minute later, a ghostly shape appears out of the fog. We fall in behind her and soon, with a wave

and a cheer of thanks, we're back on our way.

Rich looks a bit disgruntled. "It's a good show for all of his passengers," he says. "Look at this yacht we're going to rescue." But it's a good show for us, too—and a major time-saver. Without the *Endeavor*, we'd have had to detour two or three miles out to sea to find enough open water to proceed.

The next morning, we finally tie up in Longyearbyen, a hundred-year-old mining town that's been gussied up with modular houses, a shopping mall, and even a small college, but where reindeer still wander the streets. The fields are full of wildflowers and snowmobiles, both of which significantly outnumber the 1,100 residents.

After a mandatory check-in at the *sysselemann's*, or governor's, office, it's off to the gun shop. There, an old guy with a Hitler-style mustache rents Rich a second rifle—a bolt-action Mauser dating from World War II, complete with Nazi swastika and Reichstag eagle engraved on the barrel. He also sells him something the *sysselemann* recommended, a flare pistol designed to scare off bears. The trick, the salesman explains, is to make sure the flare lands between you and the bear. Landing it on the far side of the bear could have the unintended effect of driving the animal toward you.

"How do you know where the flare is going to land?" Rich asks.

"I recommend practice," he replies.

LIKE ANTARCTICA, SPITSBERGEN belongs to everyone and to no one, so you don't need a passport to go there. Under the Svalbard Treaty, a by-product of the Versailles negotiations at the end of World War I, Norway holds sovereignty over the archipelago, but virtually anyone who wants to enter, reside, or exercise property rights—Norwegian or not—can do so. Spitsbergen's second-largest "city" is the Russian and Ukrainian settlement of Barentsburg, a sooty Soviet-era time warp in which 900 contract workers struggle to keep an unprofitable coal mine running, largely because it affords their mother country a

**PLACES & PRICES**  
If chartering a yacht into the polar extremes sounds like your kind of cruise, turn to page 318.





symbolic toehold on the island.

Yet there's an admirable underdog spirit about the place. The museum is unexpectedly good, with fabulous portraits of miners and apparatchiks, and the people are warm and friendly, particularly when Pierre starts speaking Russian to them.

"I am making so many friends," he says, returning to the boat with a load of vodka, mittens, and felt boots. "This place is great."

When we again turn north, there's more ice to battle—and then suddenly none at all. As we head up the Forlandsundet, the long channel inside the great barrier island called Prins Karls Forland, the clouds lift to reveal a triumphal avenue, a sort of Arctic Champs-Élysées of colossal glaciers sweeping down to the sea. A breeze comes up from the southwest. Pierre leaps to his feet to trim the sails and then manages to wrest the helm from Cristina. Of the nine of us, he's by far the most accomplished sailor, having raced around the world four times in the 1970s and '80s in the Whitbread Challenge. "I was lucky to be alive then, when it was all still a big adventure," he says. "Now people sail past Cape Horn, and if they're not on watch they don't even get out of bed to look. For us, that was something we had dreamed about for months and years."

Another day's sail brings us to Magdalenafjorden, a small, picturesque, glacier-strewn bay often billed as the most beautiful spot on Spitsbergen. That seems a stretch, but then again, the fjord is about as far north as most big cruise liners are willing to go, so perhaps a certain amount of hype is to be expected.

Even 30 years ago, when the explorer Tilman sailed through, the place could be unpleasantly crowded. "Readers will probably agree with me that all this tourist activity in Magdalenafjorden and elsewhere, while convenient for posting letters, detracts from the romance that even in these days should still cling to so distant and so desolate an island," he wrote. "From now on, however, we should be on our own. In a small boat on the north and east coasts of Vestspitzbergen one feels almost as far out on a limb as one could wish."

Oddly, Magdalenafjorden is almost empty when we arrive, and we have the same sense of leaving the world behind when we depart. We do so on foot, roping together to climb a glacier to the high ridge north of the

fjord, then descending via another glacier to a bay on the other side. Rich and Alec bring the boat around, and when they pick us up, everybody's smiling. It feels like we've finally begun to inch out onto that limb ourselves.

**R**ICH SEES THE BEARS FIRST—three white humps that might easily be boulders on a poppy-covered hillside along another fjord, except that every now and then one of them moves. They appear to be grazing on... something.

We drop anchor and crowd into a dinghy to see how close we can get—about 200 yards before the propeller starts grinding on rocks. The mother seems to sense our presence, sitting up for a minute, but eventually loses interest.

Suddenly Michele di Giorgio is standing up, brandishing his camera. "You have to put me ashore," he hisses to Dion. "Don't worry, I have a lot of experience with big animals."

Dion, to his credit, doesn't laugh at him. "I'm sorry," he says, "but I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because we made an agreement with the *sysselemand* to abide by the rules, one of which prohibits going ashore if polar bears are sighted."

"Well, okay," Michele says, sheepishly sitting down. "If you're going to put it that way..."

We get a reminder of the bears' carnivorous side after lunch, when we motor up to one of Spitsbergen's largest glaciers, ten miles wide. Great hunks of calved ice are scattered across the beautiful turquoise water, and we pick our way between them until Rich spots one that looks somehow different—not just dark, but dark red. He nudges right up to it, startling a skua and a pair of kittiwakes that are standing around the edge of a three-foot-wide pool of blood, bobbing for little bits of gut and fur. After the trip, Michele will send out an e-mail with two pictures: a fat, bearded seal sleeping on an iceberg, and this blood-drenched scene. "*Focaprima*" and "*Focadopo*," he

captions them. Seal before, seal after.

Steaming out of the fjord, we round the northernmost point of Spitsbergen and set out across the Hinlopen Strait. There is ice now, lots of it, and in a different pattern than we've seen before—wide, square plates of the stuff, some dozens of yards across. A chill wind is blowing from the north. You can almost feel the pack up there, the biggest iceberg of all, 30 or 40 miles away.

Our plan is to cross the strait and set foot on Spitsbergen's neighboring island, Nordauslandet, via Murchison-



fjorden. But it's not to be. The first entrance we try is blocked, and when we turn south to attempt the other, we find it's even worse.

Rich parks the boat nose-first on an ice slab the size of a tennis court. Some of us get off to wander around. Bigger and bigger pieces of pack begin to float by.

"We probably could get in," Rich says, scanning the horizon. "Whether or not we could get out to catch the plane, I don't know." He pauses. "With time you can get anywhere."

And so, with that morsel of Tilmanesque wisdom hanging in the air, we turn back. There are still some good moments to come, however. Two days later, we'll pull off our biggest climb, the ascent of an unnamed and—who knows?—possibly unclimbed 3,000-foot peak. What I will remember best, though, is our exit from the Hinlopen, the day after Rich turned us around. A storm had developed to the south, and by the time we left our anchorage, the sky was dark and gusting past 40 knots—gale force. Out in the channel, big rollers were beginning to form, and even with the mainsail down and only half of the yankee rolled out, we were making a scary 11 knots.

Cristina had the helm, as usual, and although the hood of her foul-weather gear was cinched tight, I caught a glimpse of the expression on her face—enough, at any rate, to know that she was smiling. □

**"Remember, you don't have to be faster than the bear," Alec told me with a grin. "You just have to be faster than one of the Italians"**