

Some of you may recall an article that I wrote in *The Biomedical Scientist* on a trip to Antarctica and the opportunities for CPD and risk management on the cruise. It seemed like a good idea to follow that trip up with a visit to the Arctic.

I booked to travel to Svalbard and to spend a short time there before embarking on a cruise round the coast to visit historical sites, do some hiking and look for wildlife.

Svalbard is a Norwegian territory with research stations and the most northerly inhabited settlement in the world, Ny-Ålesund, 790 N, which is basically a town dedicated to research activities. To give context, Svalbard is as far north as the top of Greenland.

Opportunity to learn

The trip to the Arctic was another opportunity for learning about the biology

of plants, birds and animals in a polar environment, with lots of health and safety and risk management information. We had to attend a compulsory briefing on safety e.g. getting in and out of zodiacs from the ship and the shore, have the emergency procedures explained and practiced and, most specifically, have a safety briefing with regard to polar bears.



Other than the centre of Longyearbyen, the main town on Svalbard, you cannot walk around without an armed escort or your own rifle.

On all the excursions the expedition crew posted look outs and carried rifles which were checked in and out of the ship store. We also had a Russian polar bear expert in the team. The other big risk assessment you could do was assessing whether you would like to do a “polar plunge”, jumping off the ship into the sea. I reckoned this presented an unacceptable risk of a possible heart attack, so declined. As a safety precaution a rope was attached

to all those who did take the plunge and no one fell prey to any wild life.

Another risk assessment that had to be considered was ensuring the zodiacs did not go too close to the faces of glaciers in case of getting swamped following a calving from the front of the glacier. We had an unexpected issue one day when the inlet we were in was quickly filled with floating ice and it took a very long, cold time to negotiate our way back to the ship.

Presentations

As is common place on any cruise ship, there were stations around the ship with antimicrobial hand gel to avoid the spread of infections, notably norovirus. We were advised on a daily basis about the amount of clothing to wear: the weather was truly Arctic and several times the expedition leader advised us to put on everything we had. We came closer to the pole than we did in Antarctica and were the first cruise ship of the season this far north, so it did get rather chilly. At this time of year the sun does not set and remains high in the



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sky. This is quite disorientating, as you cannot judge the time of day or directions.

On sunny days the landscapes are wonderful: on cold, snowy days it is bleak yet there is still a beauty, even at sites of industrial archaeology.

Each day there was a lecture presentation about something related to the trip: from the complexities of the local dwarf reindeer’s circulatory adaptations to the cold, to birdlife via the historical places visited. The first recorded visit to Svalbard was by Willem Barentsz in 1596 who named the island, Spitsbergen, as he landed at an area with pointed mountains. The first ever whaling station set up by the Dutch was the pragmatically named Smeerenburg, or Blubber Town, established in 1619. We also visited two

sites where early historic attempts to reach the North Pole started out, neither successful. The expeditions took little or no regard of the local information provided by experts such as Nansen, nor of weather conditions and did not carry adequate supplies of food. So, useful learning to apply to project planning: be properly prepared and take expert advice.

Seeing wildlife

It was very nice to be able to get close to the reindeer, Arctic foxes hunting and dozing walrus on land, while we saw a number of types of seal at sea and on ice floes. I discovered that polar bears are prey to a parasite, which also affects other wild life, *Trichinella* species, and which can be contracted by man, so hunters are

advised by the CDC website about proper handling and cooking of meat.

The birdlife is highly diverse: there was a chance to see ptarmigan on a lek and the sadly endangered puffin. Guillemots, resemble penguins, and flock on huge cliff faces and the fulmar is similar to the albatross. It was a chance to carry out comparative biology and to note how parallel evolution takes place.

So, this was another trip with a real difference, lots of biological and historical CPD, quite a lot of risks to consider, plenty of health and safety and food for thought about project planning. If you fancy a diversion into research and don’t mind a long, dark winter, Svalbard is the place for you to apply.

And to answer the big question: yes, we did see two polar bears, which was absolutely amazing. Such powerful and beautiful creatures. 

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THE SUN DOES NOT SET

After last year’s article on a CPD trip to Antarctica, Pathology Services Manager **Sue Alexander** sets sail again, this time for the Arctic.