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Jacket photographs: *front*, Chong Kumdan I, East Karakoram (Paul Nunn); *back*, Kongsfjorden and Dronningfjella, Spitsbergen (Simon Fraser)

HUTCHINSON

Travels in Svalbard

SIMON FRASER

(Plate: back cover)

For a mountainous Arctic archipelago almost the size of Ireland, Svalbard is strangely neglected in the pages of the *Alpine Journal*; yet it is undoubtedly one of the gems of the far north. Svalbard cast its spell on, amongst others, the eminent mountain explorer and Himalayan pioneer Tom Longstaff, who made two visits with expeditions from Oxford University in 1921 and 1923; amongst his companions were Noel Odell and Sandy Irvine. Other early explorers of Spitsbergen's mountainous interior were A E Nordenskjöld and Sir Martin Conway. The name Spitsbergen, or 'Spiky Mountains' was given by the Dutch after the discovery of the islands by Willem Barents in 1596.

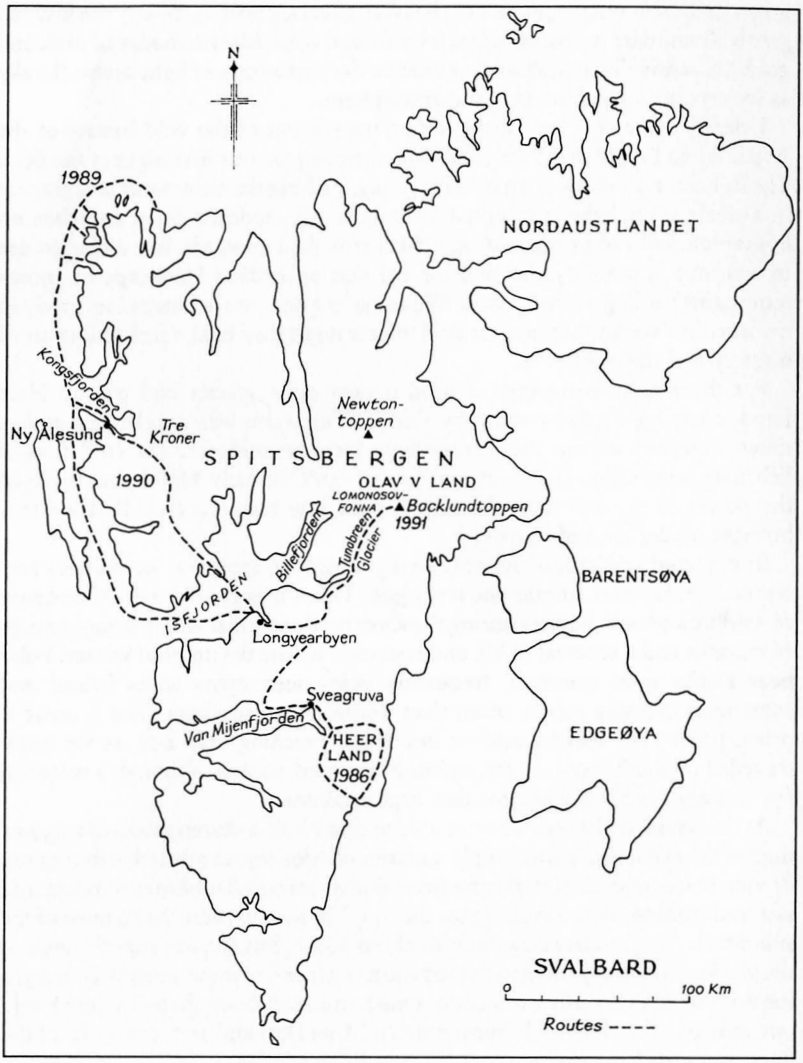
After many years of climbs and travels in some of the world's most spectacular ranges, Longstaff was charmed by the Arctic, and devoted whole chapters to Spitsbergen and Greenland in his autobiography *This My Voyage*. Describing his first glimpse of Spitsbergen, sailing from Tromsö via Bear Island, he wrote '. . . we watched the magic peaks of Spitsbergen rise slowly above the horizon. The snowy landscape was flooded with primrose light, the true light of the far north, a thin yellow radiance totally different from the deep blue distances under higher suns in lower latitudes.'[1]

I had long wished to visit Svalbard, and the chance came in 1986 when I was one of twelve men, mostly with British Antarctic Survey field experience, who were recruited as mountain safety advisers by a seismic survey team exploring for oil. Our job was to ensure the safety of the survey team in the hostile environment of the arctic winter.

It was a dramatic sight as we flew north in early February across the pink-tipped summits of the mountains of northern Norway and headed across the ocean into the polar night towards Bear Island and, beyond that, Svalbard. As the aircraft descended through a thin cloud layer to the airport at Longyearbyen, we could just make out the inhospitable landscape of rugged, empty mountains, faintly visible in the dim twilight of the polar winter at latitude 78°N.

Spitsbergen is the largest island of Norway's Svalbard archipelago and is similar in size to Switzerland. Situated far beyond the northernmost fringes of Europe, it lies midway between the Arctic Circle and the North Pole. By February, the southern horizon glows for several hours each day with a pale, eggshell blue, heralding the return of the sun to high northern latitudes after four months continuously below the horizon. It is as if Nature holds her breath and braces herself for the return of the life-giving energy of the sun.

The survey was scheduled for the period between the return of the sun in



February and the onset of the summer thaw in May when travel with tracked vehicles becomes impossible owing to melt streams on the glaciers and the breakup of the sea ice. We were based at the mining settlement of Sveagruva in Van Mijenfjorden. Shortly after our arrival there was the annual *solfest*, or 'sun party', to celebrate the return of the sun. After the formality of a meal and speeches, Norwegian reserve was suddenly abandoned and full rein given to a wild party. The following morning the -32°C temperature did little to ease appalling hangovers.

Winter in the Arctic is extraordinarily beautiful. Clear night skies are alive with countless glittering stars. The aurora borealis pulses with an unearthly

green glow, shimmering across the heavens in eerie patterns. By day the low sun gently illuminates a pristine, frozen landscape with delicate shades of pink and gold. Occasionally, parhelia form spectacular cartwheels of light across the sky as ice crystals are refracted in the atmosphere.

I clearly remember an overpowering impression of the wild beauty of the Arctic when I skied up to the col above our camp on our first night in the field. The full moon shone out of a cold black sky, bathing the mountains and glaciers in a steely silver light interrupted by stark black shadows. Skies crunched on boilerplate slabs of brittle sastrugi which stretched upwards, like a choppy sea frozen into immobility. Beyond the col was an endless landscape of snowy mountains leading to the E coast. We came to know those ranges intimately in the next few weeks, but on that cold winter night they held a forbidding air of mystery and the unknown.

For three months we criss-crossed almost every glacier and pass in Heer Land, covering about 6000km by skidoo. The work was unrelenting and at times monotonous, but the surroundings were magnificent. The cold days of February were followed by a record low of -48°C in early March, but by April the power of the sun took the edge off the low temperatures. Bad weather brought milder air and wet snow.

In this cold wilderness the only living things we ever saw were arctic fox, reindeer, polar bear, fulmar and ivory gull. This is in contrast to the abundance of wildlife and wild flowers during the short arctic summer which brings a surge of warmth and a renewal of life and resources before the onset of winter. Polar bear tracks were common, frequently being seen many miles inland and sometimes crossing passes more than 500m above sea-level. The E coast is prime polar bear habitat and an important breeding area but, as we never travelled on the E coast sea ice, sightings were infrequent, although a watchful eye was always maintained for this large predator.

As the days lengthened, we were able to climb half-a-dozen peaks during free time in the evenings. It was simply a matter of selecting an attractive mountain, driving there by skidoo, changing from skidoo suits and mukluks to boots and skis and crampons, and heading for the top. The ascents were short, most of the summits having modest elevations of about 800m, but all gave superb views of the glaciers sweeping down to the remote E coast and of mountains stretching to the horizon in every other direction. One particular chisel-shaped summit held our attention for weeks. We nicknamed it 'Ama Dablam' and it was one of the finest summits I reached with my partner Rory McKee.

Early in May, the fine stable weather and -20°C temperatures were replaced by warm air and mist. The thaw set in with a vengeance: we heard the sounds of running water for the first time in three months, and the delightful song of the snow bunting heralded the approach of summer.

Three years later, I returned to Spitsbergen to lead a wildlife-watching tour on a Dutch expedition vessel. We spent two weeks cruising along the W and N coasts of Spitsbergen, landing in inflatable boats at many coastal sites where there are numerous bird colonies and sites of botanical and archaeological interest. We sailed amongst scattered ice floes to the edge of the Arctic Ocean pack ice at about 80°N. The NW of Spitsbergen is a national park and has some

fine mountain country, with steep pyramid peaks and long serrated ridges separated by broad glaciers descending to the fjords which cut deeply into the coastline. In the words of Wilfrid Noyce, it is 'a country to delight the climber',[2] but on this occasion there was no opportunity to climb any peaks.

In 1990 I was invited to lead a ski touring party for Erskine Expeditions, guiding six clients on a two-week journey from Isfjorden to the Norwegian research station at Ny Ålesund in Kongsfjorden on the NW coast. We were landed by boat on a flat peninsula on the northern side of Isfjorden in brilliant sunshine at midnight. This time, the Norwegians were celebrating mid-summer's night, with the same verve and dedication as they celebrated the February *solfest*. Our chartered boat became the setting for another wild party. By contrast, the surroundings were as serene and peaceful as only the Arctic can be on a calm, fine night in June.

Snow conditions in late June were very poor and for two days we skied across waterlogged tundra, often breaking through the snow surface into deep slush pools. Once on the glacier, surfaces improved and, after crossing two passes and climbing several peaks, we descended the Kongsvegen glacier to camp near the glacier snout overlooking a chaotically crevassed area with 50m icecliffs calving ice debris into the fjord. It was a magnificent, fine evening, with good views of the impressive Tre Kroner peaks and the bulky mass of Dronningfjella (1263m). From here there was a strenuous walk along the shore, with heavy loads, to Ny Ålesund.

In 1991, Erskine Expeditions ran another ski tour in Spitsbergen, this time taking advantage of spring snow conditions by going in April. The original objective was Newtontoppen (1717m), the highest point in Svalbard. The plan was to reach Billefjorden by crossing the sea ice of Isfjorden by skidoo and then skiing from there on to the ice cap surrounding Newtontoppen. However, sea ice conditions were reported to be poor, which was something of an understatement, as there was no sea ice at all in Isfjorden when we flew in to Longyearbyen.

The contingency plan was to travel overland eastwards by skidoo to the sea ice in Templefjorden and then attempt to reach Newtontoppen from there. The greater distance on ski across the Lomonosovfonna ice cap made the success of this plan uncertain owing to our time limits. However, the 1991 group of five clients and myself reached the snout of the Tunabreen glacier by skidoo at midnight on 15 April. Two days of skiing took us to the top of the Tunabreen and we then decided to head for an attractive range of mountains in Olav V Land which we hoped would give some good touring in a rarely visited area, and allow a margin for bad weather.

In the event, this proved to be a good decision, as we had a superb tour with more skiing and mountaineering than we would have had by pushing on to Newtontoppen. Out of twelve days in the field, eight days were spent skiing with pulkas (sleds) and four days ski mountaineering from camps in the Backlundtoppen group (1068m) and at the head of the Tunabreen where there are some 1100m peaks. We had also hoped to climb Terrierfjellet (1082m), which Odell and Longstaff climbed in 1921, but headwinds delayed our approach and we were pinned down that night in a 50 knot blow.

Generally the weather was superb, with many brilliantly sunny days and temperatures in the minus twenties. Two days of windy conditions made travelling unpleasant owing to the low temperatures but, as the strongest winds came at night, there were no lie up days. April is the best month for ski touring as it has the lowest precipitation of any month in Spitsbergen, with little of the dank mist which is so common in summer.

A characteristic of peaks in Svalbard is that however modest they may appear from below, and however straightforward the ascent, they always provide stunning viewpoints. Our 1991 ascents of Backlundtoppen, Svanbergfjellet, Annafjellet and Nemtinovfjellet gave fantastic views of an immaculate, uninhabited wilderness. On the latter two peaks, the warming effect of April sunshine and the extraordinary clarity of the atmosphere made us reluctant to descend. We lingered on the tops, savouring the magnificent landscape and the shared exhilaration.

On the summit of Backlundtoppen we stood on the edge of a huge precipice dropping to a heavily crevassed glacier. South-eastwards, the ice swept down towards the coast and we gazed across to Edgeøya, the island explored by Gino Watkins in 1927. More recently, it was the location for many of the polar bear sequences in the beautiful wildlife television documentary *Kingdom of the Ice Bear* by Hugh Miles and Mike Salisbury, who filmed there in March 1984.

Skiing across a vast expanse of rippling sastrugi, stretching to distant horizons as far as the eye can see, has a very special appeal. The purity and vastness of a polar wilderness, the rhythm of skiing day by day towards a remote objective, the total commitment of travelling across a cold desert where escape can only be achieved by days of sustained effort, creates a deep and lasting impression.

Many writers have tried to describe the lure of wilderness but, as with the lure of mountaineering, rational explanations usually seem inadequate. Josef Svoboda's words show a deep understanding of the value of the northern wilderness: 'The High Arctic is the world's largest desert. Filled with *kenosis* – emptiness, the most precious resource the High North has to offer the eternally product-hungry civilisation'.[3]

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1 Tom Longstaff, *This My Voyage*. London, John Murray, 1950.
2 *World Atlas of Mountaineering*, edited by Wilfrid Noyce and Ian McMorrin. London, Thomas Nelson, 1969.
3 Josef Svoboda quoted in Bryan Sage's *The Arctic and its Wildlife*. London, Croom Helm, 1986.