

The First Voyage of Lumina – post 12

Sailing in Svalbard

This post is dedicated to John Westoby who died recently. A sailor and fellow Swallow Boat owner, and someone I have had a lot of fun sailing with over the years.

Back towards civilisation.

From Ny-Alesund we had a couple of days heading down the sound between King Karls Forland and the mainland of Svalbard, the first night in a quiet unglaciated bay which made a nice change, almost Scottish but without much vegetation. On the shore we could see what could either be one huge bone, or just a piece of driftwood. So out came the dinghy first thing and an expedition ashore. Indeed it is a whale bone from some real leviathan of the deep, possibly hundreds of years old, who knows?



Now that's a bone!

Further on we turned into a little fjord to look at a couple of cabins, the first still maintained and used by hikers and the second another relic of the mining era, one of the claim huts. This one was reputed to still have the claim sign nailed over the door. However, time has not been so kind to this one and it had collapsed. Even worse it had fallen over so that the door and sign was beneath all the debris. One could just about make out the back of it

beneath what would have been the roof or walls, but that is it.



We also met up with the girls from the PolarSysse, this is main workhorse of the Syssemeister and looks like a very modern supply vessel. Onboard is a very capable rib which goes quite long distances from the vessel to inspect the huts and vessels in the area. We were now about 25 miles from the parent vessel but the girls were determined to do their job. The format was the same as before, one was a police officer and the other a field officer, they checked us off their list, that we had a weapon and then to tick a further box we both got breathalised! Apparently they take a dim view of sailing and drinking.... They did also approve of the antlers we had just collected on the hillside as that is ok, but to collect a pair with a skull attached is very illegal!



Carol, breathalised on the shore

At the south end of the sound we turned towards Longyearbyen and had a final night anchored behind a spit strewn with driftwood. We took the Dinghy ashore and had a lovely walk down the beach inspecting all the wood, some of which must be a hundred years old. There were many wooden boxes of various sizes, plenty of logs and every now and then what would have been a wooden barrel, however the metal bands had corroded and all that is left is a pile of staves. The interesting thing is that wooden barrels have not been used for years, and also, that the barrel would have lain untouched all that time.



Remains of a barrel

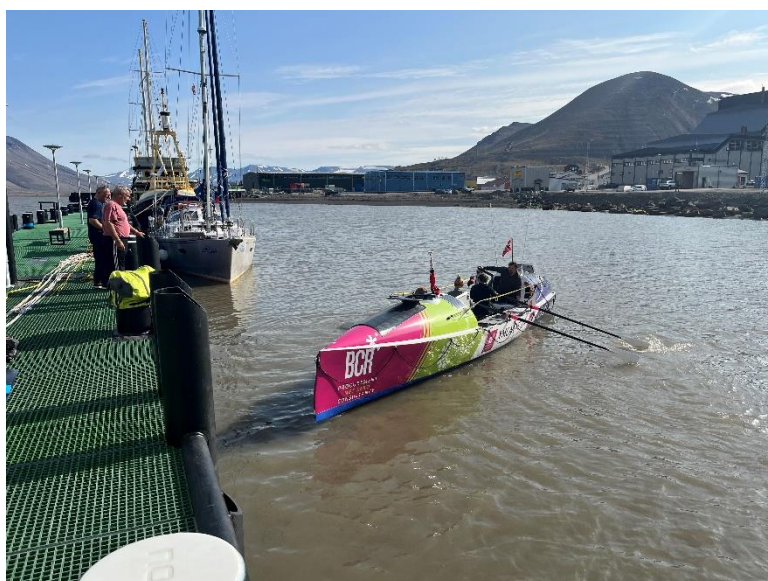
When we got back close to where the boat was anchored a visitor had arrived. This one wasn't

going to ask for any papers or samples and just seemed intent to belch and snort and roll about on the beach. It was probably the biggest walrus we had seen.



He didn't seem to mind posing for a photograph, in fact was still there when we left the next day!

Back in Longyearbyen the next day we met up with Miles and Claire who had flown in to join us, spent some time in the bar with them, did some shopping, and had a nice evening in the Svalbard brewery. On one occasion we returned to the pontoon to find a rowing boat arrived. Four hardy Royal Marines had spent a fortnight rowing from Tromso and despite spending 5 nights on a sea anchor in a storm had made it to tie up next to us. They varied from a couple who had already rowed the Atlantic to one which had only done a days rowing before. They had a bit of a surfeit or rations and were keen not to take them home, so with a suitable donation agreed to their charity I wheeled them home. I say wheeled,



because by the time they had unloaded them all there was a complete trolley load. They had trailed their boat up to Tromso, the trailer had then been put in a container to get to Longyearbyen where it would re-united with the boat. It would then make its way back to Tromso by ship and the drivers would fly back out to drive it home.

Intrepid rowers arrive

From Longyearbyen now with crew on board, we headed out with a couple of destinations before the ocean crossing. About 25 miles towards the sea, one comes upon a desolate place that once was the centre of coal mining in Svalbard. On a most unhospitable piece of coast lies Grumant, the site of a Russian coal mine that ceased in the early 1960s. We anchored and took the dinghy ashore explore some more ruins. Due to the nature of the coastline here, the coal was taken by little train a mile through a tunnel, and then down the coast another 8 or so to where there was a pier. It appeared that originally what now is a ravine was once culverted and filled in to enable the train to run from the entrance of the tunnel across to where the coal mine was. At some point the wooden culvert that is still visible must have got blocked, ponding the water behind and eventually the whole lot must have washed out to sea, explaining all the mangled metalwork on the shore.



Inside the entrance to the coal mine, note the frozen water – permafrost rules here!



A fairly desolate hillside to make a living on!

Another 25 or so miles further on we came to Barentsberg. This is a bit of a controversial visit as tours are not running from Longyearbyen due to Ukraine war, but on the basis that we are unlikely to be here again, and the only working coal mine in the world that offers tours, I decided we should stop there. We had a meal alone in the hotel, and had the same lady serving and running the bar as was at Pyramiden a month or so ago. It seems they work a rotation, as our guide in the mine the next morning was also the same girl we had before. For a working mining settlement, we saw very few people around both in the evening and morning but there was coal being bulldozed in the storage area so they must be producing something.

I have always wanted to go down a coal mine and it was probably just as might be expected, long tunnels with little trains, doors to regulate the air flow around the mine, and long conveyor belts. Hardly anything to write home about really!



They were repainting the sign, whether this is because that is what tourists are expecting to see or is for real I don't know. Either way, having Russia on Norwegian soil is certainly an anomaly and was apparently interesting during the Cold War as well.



On the mine tour, the white powder is apparently a fire suppressant in case of explosion and was liberally spread everywhere.

After our walk round the mine we had one more days run south down the coast of Svalbard before starting our crossing. On the way we saw some guys out in a rib fishing, so dropped the lines and immediately caught the largest cod of the trip. We don't have a scale big enough so have to measure the length to go in the league table – this one came in at 80cm!



Before we stopped for the night we visited a glacier for our guests, either to see a calving glacier, navigate through the floating ice, or more importantly get some glacier ice for the Gin. A fine cod meal was prepared and we retired for the night. An early start was called for as there was a good few days of favourable weather to get back across to Norway, however I felt really rough in the morning with flu. However, obviously trained well, Carol stepped up and skippered the boat whilst the captain languished in his bunk for the day. By evening, I was still not much better, but fortunately the rest of the crew seemed in good spirits so we continued to motor overnight down the coast. 24hrs later, and I was feeling a bit better so took over my watches, but by now Carol and Miles were going down. This was the pattern for the next 4 days so by the time we reached Norway everyone was pretty much back to normal. Was it Covid? Did it get picked up in Longyearbyen or was it a Russian strain? Well, we lived to tell the tale anyway.

Oh, and the prize for Chemistry goes to Mr Ben Reedy as apparently iron filings and Hydrochloric acid is a good way of making Hydrogen.