

The First Voyage of Lumina – post 7

Sailing to Svalbard

21-27 June Getting accustomed to Svalbard

After our first anchorage by the glacier we proceeded into the next fjord, Bellsund and found a lovely anchorage behind a long low island that almost blocked off the fjord, however there is an opening at either side with a great sheltered bay on the south entrance. As we were coming in a walrus surfaced almost next to us, I am not sure who was most surprised, him or us. Anyway, he snorted and disappeared again. The weather was now a bit overcast and with no wind to speak of we motored across the entrance into the adjoining fjord where there was some history to be found.

Mining was the thing in Svalbard after the whaling had finished and people came here in search of all sorts of minerals. In Recherchiefjorden there is an interesting set of mine carts on the shore. They were apparently off loaded here on route to some other mining project, however, they were never retrieved and now lie abandoned on the shore. Nearby is a hut which lies at a rather jaunty angle and has apparently nothing to do with the mine carts. A dinghy excursion to the shore, after anchoring, allowed inspection of the carts and the hut. The hut was built as a project to start hunting trips in the area as there were plenty of reindeer, many of which seem to remain today. They are truly remarkable animals as they seem to exist on virtually no vegetation and yet stay there all year. We anchored for the “night” at the head of this small fjord.



Mining trucks never used

Still out of sync with night and day and with Longyearbyn in our sights I got up at midnight and started the long motor to town as there was still hardly any wind. Being Friday, we

wanted to get to the Sysselmiesteren (Governor) office by closing time to check in. We arrived with plenty of time in early afternoon and collected our papers and passports and walked up the hill to the office which overlooks the harbour. As per the Norwegian tradition we removed our shoes at the foyer and presented ourselves to reception.

We were worried that we were a few days earlier than our passage plan already submitted had said, that's no problem we were told and we did not need passports to enter, or visas or anything. It seems Svalbard is a real anomaly as anyone can come to live here as well but I doubt the inflatable boats would make it from Calais and apart from sailing your own boat, the only way in is via Norway.

So, after the non-event of the check in process, we proceeded to the sports store to see about hiring a rifle or flare gun to scare the bears. We ended up with a flare gun as we can buy this so will have some deterrent when we leave here in a month to explore the southern fjords (rather than return it) and it will also be useful on the boat if we need flares.



The ropeways that used to carry coal to the docks passed right over the town



Main street on a quiet day – no cruise ships in!



It's probably a mile or so from the harbour up to the town and after a bit of retail therapy – well a pair of trousers actually, and a coffee we returned to the boat and a good rest. The following day we returned to tourist land and visited the Polar Museum and the North Pole museum. The former is the official one telling you all about Svalbard, history, geology and ecology and the latter all about the race to the pole in the latter 19th and early 20th century. Despite the North Pole exhibition obviously not being centrally funded, it was not so lavish, the sheer volume of exhibits and history there was tremendous, more of that later as we actually manage to visit the places in the north of Svalbard where these expeditions set off from.

So, with the intention of taking a few days to explore nearby fjords and in particular visit the abandoned coal mining settlement off Pyramiden we left the views of thousands of tourists from the cruise ships walking along the dock up to the town and headed out.

The first night saw us anchored behind a shingle spit beneath towering scree slopes up to cliffs. It was another typical Svalbard place, impressive geomorphology but hardly any vegetation.

We then headed down towards the head of the adjacent fjord to the old dock at Pyramiden. This was once an important coal mining settlement housing over a thousand people. It was, together with another still working settlement, part of the Svalbard Treaty of 1920. This enables all the signatories to engage in commercial activities (mainly coal mining) whilst recognising that the whole is a demilitarised zone.

Pyramiden started mining in the early part of the 20th century and was gradually developed eventually housing 1500 people. Due to its position there were times of the year when it was completely cut off by ice in the fjord so was completely self-sufficient with its own farm

with pigs and chickens and a greenhouse growing vegetables and flowers. The regime sounds quite unusual from what we might have expected from the soviet era, all the miners and support workers were paid well and encouraged to stay by increasing their salaries the longer they were there. This was possibly due to laying within the Svalbard Treaty which meant that, although it was Russian, it still comes under Norwegian law. It sounded like there were interesting times during the cold war particularly.

Coal mining ceased in 1998 and was left till 2012. Since then, attempts have been made to tidy up the mining relics and open it up to tourists who want to see this part of history that is pretty much left as it was the day they left.



Today there is a dock with loading facility for the coal ships, although recently they have installed a pontoon for smaller vessels. Initially this was taken and we had to tie up to the decaying wooden structure that had obviously had a hard life, but one of the boats was leaving soon and we were then able to move over.

They were well organised, a man on the dock was in radio contact with the hotel to arrange for a tour for us and maybe a meal later. If you have a weapon for the bears, you can walk around but we thought that having come all this way it would be worth having a guide that can take us into all the locked buildings and give us a real insight into the place.

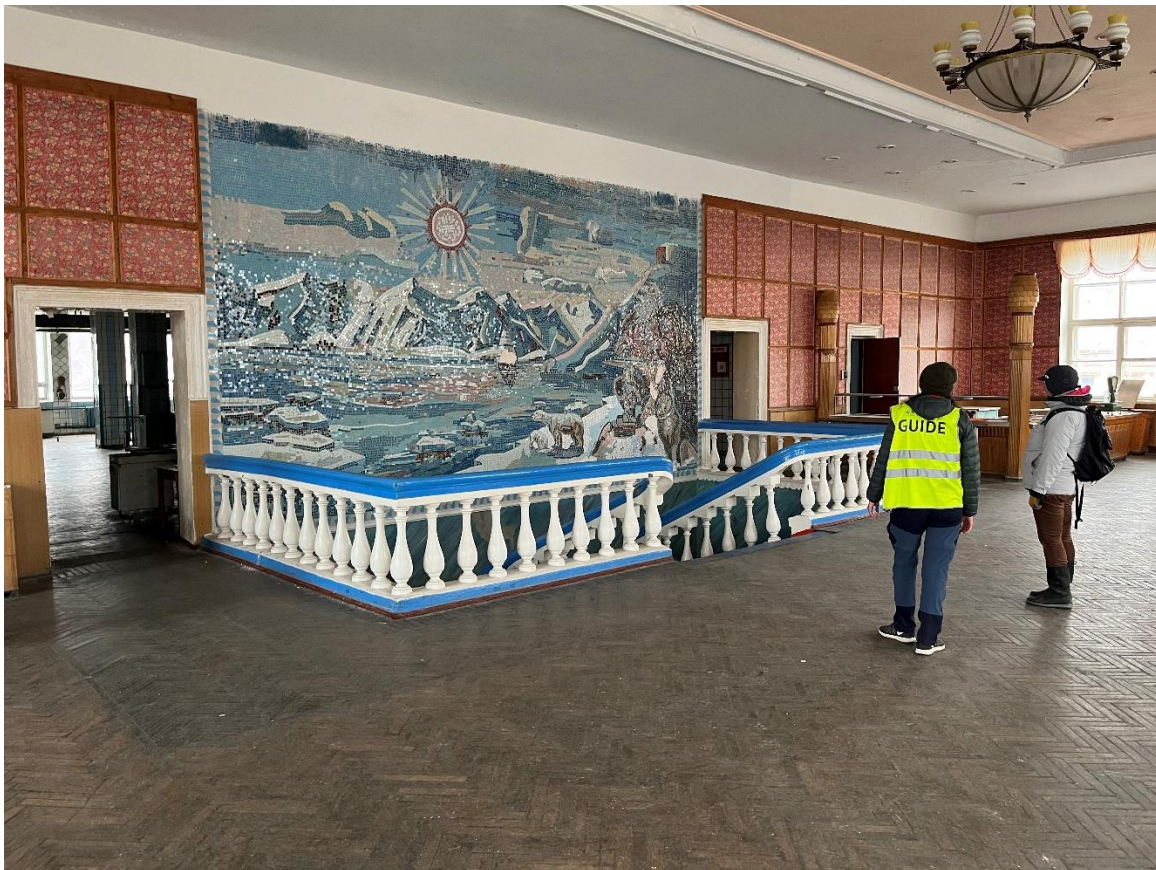
She took us first by special request to see the site of the glasshouse. Alas it was deemed to be unsafe and was one of the first buildings to be tidied and now all remains is a level site. So the most northern glasshouse ever built is no more, but I have been there...

The piggery



The pig and chicken sheds are still there together with an enormous stack of bricks, probably hundreds of tons all ready for buildings that were never built. Our guide then took us into one of the accommodation dormitories. Each person had a reasonably sized room with bathroom and hallway. Whilst most had taken all their possessions, the furniture was left together with various clues to the last residents in 1998. In those

days they were obviously very curious to western culture with people's collections of cigarette packets, bottle labels and posters of pop groups still in some rooms. Obviously, the whole place had been looked over many times previously and anything of value taken but the scale of it was impressive. We looked in maybe ten rooms in one of 10 large dormitories and yet there were nearly 1000 such rooms there. The scale was impressive. We then made it up onto the roof to get a good look over the whole town.



The restaurant

Our guide took us to the kindergarten and school as families lived there as well, to the restaurant and kitchen where all the meals were prepared and the mining offices. The restaurant was quite an impressive building with large curving staircase up onto the first floor. Here you could see where they would have had flower displays and potted plants as the management seemed keen to make life as enjoyable as possible and indeed some of the plants are still there in their dry and frozen form.

In the mine offices there were still many desks with plans and diagrams of the mine and its workings but also the infrastructure of the town which must have been a massive undertaking to just keep functioning. Eventually we were taken up onto the top floor where the reality of the Soviets was revealed. Even in this apparently easy going place where people were there under well paid contracts were the KGB. Behind bunker like doors



overlooking the whole town they monitored everything. There were safes, one apparently still to be opened, although people had had a good go at it, and an incinerator which was full of ash from the much burning that had gone on when they knew the place was closing. However, we were not finished with the offices as at the other end of the corridor there was another room that looked just like any other office, however through a secret door in a cupboard we were shown into a further room that was apparently where the information on accidents and such like were kept before being sent back to Moscow. It seems that it was important to tell what was expected and not necessarily what was actually going on....

The door into the KGB offices!

Our tour ended with the swimming pool, one which any town would be proud of, and we retired to the hotel for dinner. There were only 4 people staying so we had no trouble with service and had a fine meal with beer brewed at Barentsberg, the still operating settlement and of course a vodka to finish. The whole afternoon had been a completely fascinating look into the past, and one which by the look of the work now starting might be one you will

not see much of in the future as work progresses dismantling the rusting mining machinery and dangerous buildings.



Lenin was always looking over you



The mine was up the mountain.



Our guide outside the Tulip hotel.

As I said last time, we will now be heading further north and out of signal, however I will put limited notes on the tracker page so keep an eye on that if you are interested.

Tim and Carol