

Experiences from Onboard the Rainbow Warrior In Svalbard

Philip Lloyd, 34 years from New Zealand, Bosun on the Rainbow Warrior doing his 12th trip for Greenpeace:



Doing up the zip on my jacket and drawing the hood down provide minimum protection from the cold wind. I'm standing on the bow while trying to see the small bergy bits that are messily arranged floating in the path of the Rainbow Warrior as she weaves her way out of the bay.

I used to think that an "Arctic Turn" was what one made while dodging the dangerous ice, but there in front of me, delicate and elegant, ice white with a black cap, darting and flitting about, is an Arctic Tern. Now, I can't write about romantic sunsets for at this time of the year because there isn't one. This, the land of the midnight sun where often one is required to check whether it is am or pm. The same sun that can drive people crazy from lack of sleep and where in the winter the lack of sun causes despair.

As a young lad growing up in New Zealand, I read and dreamed of going to the Polar regions. My father spent a summer in Antarctica as a surveyor and the slides he showed me inspired me more than I realised at the age of ten or eleven. The adventures of polar exploration and documentation, the wildlife, the Auroras, the dark, the light, the cold.....all etched into my mind. Now I look out the porthole of the Rainbow Warrior to see the glaciers, fjords and mountains that are Svalbard. We are on our way back from Ny-Alesund, an international Arctic research station only 1200 km from the North Pole.

I was lucky enough to walk a glacier, the Blomstrand, with a glaciologist to document the incredible changes that are taking place there. Driving an inflatable through the labyrinth of deep blue and seemingly sculptured ice to get to the glacier, reminded me of my experiences in the Alaskan Arctic. There we documented also several retreating glaciers, the Columbia Glacier in Prince William Sound and the Bering Glacier in South East Alaska.

We travelled north recording testimonies from the Inuit and Inupiaq settlements along the coast of Alaska and into the Beaufort Sea. Drinking tea with old subsistence whale hunters and talking about the changes that their thousand year old culture has witnessed. Thinner ice, earlier break up, later than usual icing over, less Walrus, and most significantly different species of birds and fish not seen in the region before. In the Beaufort we protested the offshore seismic activity being conducted, the first stage in the never ending pursuit of oil. Then we headed north into the retreating ice pack, counting Walrus, Polar Bears and bird life. We made it to about 73 degrees north before heading to the Chukchi Sea on the Siberian side, continuing documenting around Wrangle and Herald Island.

Now I look back out the porthole and realise we went to 79 degrees north. Wow! The Fulmars still winging by low over the water, the Puffins, the Little Auks, the Gullimots the Arctic terns. Which reminds me I am sure I recognised one of those Terns from our visits to the Antarctic region! Hard to believe these graceful birds travel 12,000 miles from one polar region to the other. They travelled further than I did to be here!(and they didn't have to eat airline food!) They are a symbol of how the planet is so small and is all one ecosystem. The last expanses of true wilderness are their feeding grounds They are surely worth preserving for me in the hope that others will follow and see the wonders of these places as I have. If I remember rightly, the Tern I recognised was flying in front of us while I was on the bow of another Greenpeace ship breaking through the ice while in search of illegal whaling ships and illegal fishing boats. So whenever you see an Arctic Tern, spare a thought for the Arctic and the Antarctic, for they are the regions to be effected first and most by climate change with wide reaching effects for the rest of this wonderful planet we live upon, the only one we've got.

"Water flows over these hands, May I use them skilfully to preserve our precious planet" Old Eskimo Song

Philip Lloyd, 34 years from New Zealand, Bosun on the Rainbow Warrior doing his 12th trip for Greenpeace.

Nikki Westwood, 24 years from UK, Deckhand on the Rainbow Warrior and on her first trip to the Arctic region:



A rare place exists, and is slowly being destroyed due to the fragility of the ecosystem and the influence of man. Despite the high latitude, the flora is exceptionally varied, but also extremely vulnerable. Vast wilderness surrounds me, rugged mountains spiced with ice within their crevices, lush growths of green and red mosses dot the terrain, cliffs scattered with various shades of red, black and green lichen. Millennial bergs from the glaciers give the shrill roar of thunder as they slowly crash into the silky, satin waters.

The glare of ice erases dimension and distance, subjecting my senses to mirage and illusion. The morning call of the numerous birds awakens my senses. How do I begin to describe such a place?

Sleep deprivation after one week in Svalbard is beginning to affect me. The constant dazzle of the midnight sun allows for time to be conceptual to the individual. I'm positive that this isn't the case during October through to February, when the region is in complete darkness. The amazing beauty of such a raw, rugged unspoilt

landscape seems to be too much stimuli for me to grasp. This is my first experience of this kind of region, in fact it is the highest north I have ever been. And I don't think I am able to take it all in.

Due to the influence the Gulf Stream has upon the archipelago, it happens to be surprisingly warm compared to other regions within the arctic circle. This is reflected within the flora and fauna, but the chill of the wind can still be a shock to the system, especially during the early hours of the morning. Huge colonies of gulls can be observed all across the region, but for myself personally I find the auks and the arctic terns absolutely fascinating to observe. Little auks and puffins are particularly common, and also very amusing. Puffins' ritual formation of flying involves flapping their tiny wings excessively to keep their round, balloon-like body in the air. Little auks' obscure cackling and making good use of the drifting sea ice that soothes the sea's surface is something that I will never forget. Arctic terns' brilliant shade of white, with their contrasting red beak, are elegant and beautiful and are particularly graceful in comparison to the other birds, and are also probably one of the most vicious, but for a very good reason. They nest upon beaches and on the tundra close to water, and are easily disturbed by humans that pass too close to the nesting area. Their pointed boomerang-shaped wings allow them to hover above the area, diving close to the passer-by by giving out a shrill, loud kree-err.

The population of Svalbard is small in comparison to the land mass and is also probably due to the harsh conditions residents face within the extreme long winter. Longyearbyen is the largest town upon Svalbard, and has all amenities that you'd expect to find anywhere, just on a minute scale. The houses are painted in natural bright colours, such as terracotta, blue and green and scattered across the valley of lush moss-covered mountains. Ny Ålesund in comparison is remote and is the base for scientific research in the area. Glaciers can be observed from the village, along with the bays' coverage of ice.

It's 4.00am and the sun is still shining, it slowly begins to break up the misty low-lying cloud over the peaks of the mountain. The sky blends imperceptibly into the neutral-coloured ice that is scattered close to the shoreline. The glacier glistens as the sun breaks through the clouds, rugged strips of various shades of blue reflect into the water. Tranquillity. An unspoiled landscape. But this is not strictly true. Habitats' influence on the ecosystem is minimal, and most of the region is designated as protected nature areas. The anthropogenic effects globally are having the largest impact. Pollution and climate change are the two biggest factors affecting the ecosystem. Summers are beginning to get warmer due to possible melting of permafrost layers; glaciers are evidently retreating, which can be seen with the naked eye. Is this down to man or a natural cycle? I believe that man has a major influence and the effects that we are observing is down to man accelerating the process through our lifestyle. It's hard sometimes to think that the everyday things that we use, such as the burning of fossil fuels, thousands of miles away could destroy such a valuable and beautiful ecosystem. We each have a responsibility to help slow this process down, rather than dealing with the consequences when it is too late. This is an easy step to make, and pressure needs to be applied to governments before the WSSD to agree to invest within renewable energy.

Nikki Westwood, 24 years from UK, Deckhand on the Rainbow Warrior and on her first trip to the Arctic region.

Joanne Hender, 1st Mate. 28 years old. From Plymouth, England:

Inflatables are one of our key tools on the ship and get used a lot for various actions around the globe. There is a routine that you get used to if you know you are going out into a boat, get a boat suit, wear suitable clothes, get a radio and do a radio check, flush the engine, check all equipment and go. Today was different though because we were in Ny Alesund, 78 degrees 55 minutes North, and today we would be taking the boats to the front of a glacier and we don't usually get to do that.

There was an air of excitement, those who had seen a glacier before knew what to expect and were keen to see it again. Those who had never been were excited because it would be something new. I have seen the Fox glacier in New Zealand and done a short hike on the Franz Joseph glacier also in New Zealand, but this was different because we were going by boat. Three inflatables left the ship and headed towards the glacier. I was the last to leave and after a short time got a call from Daniel, the Captain, to warn me of ice as they were getting closer. Having been in Antarctic waters and navigated around ice I knew what to expect. So I told the crew at the front of the boat to keep a sharp lookout and to point at any ice, these beautiful chunks are very hard and to hit one at speed would be like hitting a floating block of concrete.

As we rounded Hansoneset into the bay we got our first glimpse at Blomstrand Glacier. It seemed huge, the face of the glacier rose from the water to approximately 50 metres high. The colours were intense, especially the shades of blue. We all tend to automatically think of ice being white but that is not the case. Some of the small bergs floating in front of the glacier were like lumps of crystal, some were blue and some brown because of the earth that has been picked up and carried with them. We dropped the camera and media team off on the island opposite Blomstrandbreen, they were going to climb Brazliekollen hill to do an interview and get some photos.

Whilst they were doing that we went to Sore Gerdoya island to find the locations of where some old photos were taken so we could reproduce the same aspect and show the glacier retreat visually. Weaving our way through the ice we got steadily closer to the front of the glacier. We had to be careful not to get too close because, although hard to believe, this solid mass of ice is actually moving. As it advances the front edge becomes unstable and large sections fall off into the water, this process is called calving. It is also very loud, the first time I heard it I thought it was a distant rumble of Thunder. I was told later that the front of Blomstrandbreen glacier could be up to 4000 years old. To think that it travels for 4000 years to the front edge and then calves into the sea and slowly melts away seems like a sad end to a long journey.

As we stepped onto the island we were very careful to cause minimal impact on this delicate environment. We found two locations where we had photos nearly 100 years old from the same aspect. As I stood on one hill and compared the old picture with what my eyes were seeing, I couldn't believe the difference. The old photo was filled with the edge of the glacier the comparing picture has only a fraction of it filled with ice. It was a sad moment to see for my own eyes the reality of the change and for it to sink in. How can we stop this? Was all I could think.

One of the boats had to leave early and head back to the ship with enough crew to move her. Rob and I stayed with 2 of the boats to wait for the team that had climbed the hill. By now it was getting late but we didn't really notice because with 24 hours of daylight sometimes it is hard to know if it is the middle of the day or the middle of the night.

By the time we had finished everything and made our way slowly back to the ship (the wind had picked up making progress slow) it was around 11 pm. It had been a very long day but a very memorable day also.

Joanne Hender, 1st Mate. 28 years old. From Plymouth, England.
Currently based in New Zealand with her Fiance Phil Robinson.