



AURORA EXPEDITIONS

ON TOP OF THE WORLD

Less than 1000km from the North Pole, Svalbard is one of the most magical places left on earth. Prepare yourself for a voyage where nature’s rare gifts are everywhere as you glide through mirrored waters full of icebergs, witness polar bears and belugas, walk on sea ice and enjoy land excursions amid stunningly scenery.

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY JOCELYN PRIDE

Under the shower is not the place to be when the PA system crackles into life and our expedition leader, in an excited half-whisper, announces the captain has spotted a polar bear. With lightning speed, and dripping hair tucked under my beanie, I join my fellow expeditioners lining the top deck peering through massive camera lenses and binoculars. But even with a kind neighbour pointing to the exact spot, I can’t see it. Then suddenly it’s there, and I know I’ll never unsee the Arctic’s apex predator curled up in the ice, ironically fast asleep.

Aurora Expeditions’ 15-day Svalbard in Depth cruise is an aptly named insight into the Norwegian archipelago – a cluster of achingly beautiful islands less than 1000km from the North Pole. “We’re guided by two main variables – weather and ice,” says veteran expedition leader Howard Whelan, when we sail out of Loneyarbyen. His enthusiasm for all things polar is infectious, and his synergy with Captain Jorge Ferdinez is unparalleled. Together they pore over

charts, maps and forecasts to make the most of every moment for the 117 guests onboard the *Sylvia Earle*, named in honour of the world’s leading oceanographer, Dr Sylvia Earle, who in a pre-recorded address describes the ship as “an ambassador for the ocean”.

It’s mid-summer, and the sun doesn’t set. At all. On clear nights the ball of fire hangs above the horizon like a balloon, sprinkling shards of sparkling diamonds across the ice. Nature’s gifts are everywhere, anytime. Early one morning, I open the curtains to discover walruses floating past the balcony, huddled together on an iceberg. Another evening while luxuriating in one of the outdoor hot tubs, a black-legged kittiwake flies overhead, every feather illuminated.

CONNECTING WITH NATURE

With 24/7 daylight, we move to the rhythm of Arctic. Whelan’s goal is for us to engage with the environment both on and off the ship as much as possible through Zodiac cruising, hiking, citizen science projects, photography, beachcombing, visiting



THE ARCTIC AWAITS YOU
Aurora Expeditions will show you the Arctic like never before. Future expeditions in 2025 include Spitsbergen: Realm of the Ice Bear on 16 June; Svalbard Odyssey on 2 July; Svalbard in Depth on 4 July; Jewels of the Arctic on 12 July; Southern Greenland: On the Trail of the Vikings on 4 August; and Northwest Passage on 25 August.

historic sites and a dedicated kayaking program. Highlights are on tap. From witnessing thousands of Brünnich’s guillemot breeding pairs dotted across towering cliffs at Andréeneset; learning about phytoplankton and collecting data with a Secchi disk to help scientists; hiking across the tundra to pay respect to the sailors buried at Ytre Norskøya; plunging into the Arctic Ocean at latitude 81°N; walking on sea ice; or paddling along the dramatic face of Austfonna, Svalbard’s largest ice cap, the entire Aurora team deliver in spades.

And then there’s the day that just keeps on giving. During the morning Zodiac cruise in Liefdefjorden, we spot a polar bear lumbering across the ice, plus a pair of king eider ducks in full breeding plumage, followed by a landing at the curiously named Texas Bar, a trappers’ hut built in 1927.

GLACIER FAIRYLAND

Repositioning over a typically scrumptious lunch, we gaze through the picture windows as the *Sylvia* glides into glacier fairyland – the

famous Monacobreen glacial front. Surrounded by snow-streaked mountains framing skyscraper-sized tidal-water glaciers, our Zodiac cruise is full of action as we navigate through waters laced with blue-tinged icebergs. We pass two adult bearded seals hauled out on ice floes, a flock of kittiwakes feeding, and hear a rumbling inside a glacier as it calves, sending ice crashing into the water.

Marvelling about the day during happy hour, someone jokingly asks Whelan – “When are you going to push the button for the beluga whales to appear?” Seconds later, there’s an announcement from the bridge, and we rush outside to see flashes of white appear in front of the bow as a pod of belugas cruise by.

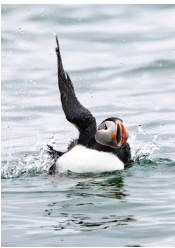
Amid its beauty, the fragility of the ethereal landscape is omnipresent. Warming faster than any other place on the planet, the Arctic is under pressure. Are we part of the problem or part of the solution? In the words of Dr Earle: “There is still time to choose whether the next century will be shared by people and polar bears.”

From an uplifting citizen science perspective, each of the nine polar bears we see over the 15 days passes muster on the Polar Bear International Standardised Fatness Index chart that ranks bears skinny, thin average, fat or very fat.

A LASTING IMPRESSION

Evening briefings help prepare us for the possible excursions and give an appreciate for the magnitude of the landscape: past, present and future. “This place has so much to say. If you open yourself to it, it will open to you,” says historian Kelsey Camacho.

During a presentation about the heady age of polar exploration, when money was thrown at explorers to find the North Pole, Camacho gives an overview of one of the most fantastical attempts. In 1897, Swedish engineer Salomon August Andrée, together with a crew of two, flew a hydrogen balloon in pursuit of the magnetic pole. They floated for 475km, crashed, then dragged sledges for three months across ice before dying on one of Svalbard’s most




THE BIG ACE
You are invited to be part of the action of Aurora Expeditions’ BIG ACE – the Bears, Ice, Glaciers, Arctic Climate Expedition 2025. Hosted by Dr Sylvia Earle in her 90th birthday year, it will honour Dr Earle’s lifelong advocacy for the world’s oceans. Departing 23 June 2025, it begins at Loneyarbyen, Svalbard, as it navigates northward to go beyond 80°N.

Opposite page: The Arctic ice is mesmerising at any time of the day. **This page, clockwise from top left:** Walking on sea ice; Waterfalls tumbling down the Austfonna ice cap; Polar bears use the ice to hunt; The purpose-built *Sylvia Earle* is 100% carbon neutral.

remote islands – Kvitøya. The following morning, Whelan achieves a lifelong goal. And takes us with him. “Over the years I’ve made several attempts, to land here or even see it in the distance,” he says.

The long pure-white dome-shaped landmass of Kvitøya looks more like a spacecraft than an island. Stepping ashore feels just as unworldly. We trek across the ice to stand before a stone monument to pay our respects to S. Andrée, N. Stringberg and K. Frænkel, their remains found 33 years after they set off in search of the North Pole.

Wild. Raw. Powerful. The island leaves a lasting impact. I see it in the eyes of others and remember a line from Shakespeare posted on one of the ship’s daily notes: “One touch of nature makes the whole world kin.”  auroraexpeditions.com.au