

Roger:

Thursday 28 May 2015

A slow start to the day as we are still steaming to Bear Island. Special guest former sub captain Alfred McLaren gave a talk "triumph and tragedy" on the sinking of the German Battleship Bismarck. He also went on to tell us of a dive he made on the Bismarck ten or so years ago. Now resting off the coast of France in 6000 meters of water they used a submersible on a Russian research ship. Eight rich people came along for a look at \$44k per head which funded the expedition.

Arriving at Bear Island now well into the arctic we mounted Zodiacs for a one and a half hour tour of the cliffs on the south west side of the island. There are over a million birds here just now. All in the process of nesting they make a spectacular sight. At any one time there seem to be thousands in the air - Northern Fulmar, three types of Guillemot, Atlantic Gannet, Northern Skua and several species of sea gull.





There was also a shipwreck from a Russian fishing vessel that has broken up over the last few years.



Magnus drove the boat through a cavern known as the Pearly Gates and a few other caves and caverns. We spotted the famous needle which was first noted in the 1500s. It looks like it should have fallen over years ago.



At our evening recap we are informed by Lucho the expedition leader that Cotton Coulson had passed away. Last Sunday, while we were stopped at Traena, Cotton (one of the ships National Geographic photographers) suffered a suspected heart attack while diving. He was evacuated to Bodo then Tromso.

As we start steaming north to Svalbard a Phillipino buffet is served.

Powered by two 3500 HP Norwegian made motors we should arrive in the ice mid-morning tomorrow.

Sylvia:

Friday 29 May 2015

Happy 62nd birthday Roger!

We woke fairly early as usual after another light night still underway to Spitsbergen, the main island of Svalbard. We made our way up the western side of the southern tip of Spitsbergen, watching for polar bears as we headed towards our intended destination for the afternoon – Hornsund, the southernmost fjord system on the west side of the island.

Just after 9am we joined a crowd in the lounge for a hands on photo workshop with some of the professional photographers on board. We happened to be sailing through sea ice so it was a good opportunity to learn about exposure compensation. Roger also got some great tips for photographing birds.



Just before lunch Magnus, one of the naturalists gave a talk on polar bears. There are between 15 and 25 thousand polar bears in the world and between 1500 and 3000 in Svalbard. The males are significantly larger than the females weighing 450-600kg but they live a lot shorter – around 15-20 years compared to the females 32.

We decided to have our lunch in the observation lounge and had just finished eating. Roger picked up his iPhone to check emails and I was scanning the landscape with my binoculars – I said “I think that’s a polar bear – let’s go to the bridge”. When I arrived at the bridge one of the naturalists said with a smile on his face – why are you here? I knew then that I had been right. They had been watching the large male make his way along shore and were waiting for us all to finish lunch before getting closer. We had some fantastic views of him as he nonchalantly wandered along stopping every now and then to sniff. At one point he even slid down a hill on his stomach. He had a marking on his back (apparently the number 7) and was included in the study numbers. The males cannot be collared due to the size of their necks and the shape of their heads. Eventually he wandered off and we resumed our sail to Hornsund.



We had originally planned hikes on land but there was too much ice so instead we did zodiac cruises around the icebergs. Roger claims it was quite warm but he did actually put some gloves (albeit thin ones) on this time!





After recap we headed off to dinner. Lucho (the expedition leader) joined us as did Robert and Sharon, a couple we have spent a bit of time with. We cracked open the champagne to celebrate Roger's birthday but Joel was waiting with anticipation for the big event. After the main course all the Phillipino wait-staff arrived at the table with their guitars, tambourines etc to serenade Roger with three birthday songs. Joel certainly enjoyed himself – Roger perhaps a little less so.



After enjoying the cake they provided we headed out to the aft deck where Joel and Roger enjoyed a few ports and a cigar.



All in all I think a birthday well celebrated.