

The Concierge

TIPS FOR TOURING HERE AND ABROAD



At Downtown Camper in Stockholm, The Nest is a rooftop wellness area with a spacious sauna.

STOCKHOLM'S 'URBAN EXPLORERS'

BY NECEE REGIS | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

The vibrant city of Stockholm is chockablock full of museums and historic sites. On a recent four-night visit, my husband and I stayed at Downtown Camper by Scandic, a centrally located hotel that promotes itself as a welcoming destination for “urban explorers.” We weren’t sure what an urban explorer was, exactly, but we soon found out.

We boarded the high-speed Arlanda Express train from the international airport, and were in the heart of the city in 20 minutes. From there it’s a 10-minute walk to the hotel, situated on Brunkebergstorg Square. (Unless weighed down by luggage, it’s best to avoid using Stockholm’s costly taxis.) From the street, the multi-story modernist cube hides its interior charms.

Upon entering the lobby, the first things to catch my eye were a series of kayaks hanging from the ceiling, our first hint at what urban exploring entailed. I subsequently learned that for a small fee, about \$5 for four hours, guests can rent bikes, longboards, skateboards, and, yes, those hanging kayaks, as a dynamic way to experience Stockholm’s 14 connected islands.

After checking in with a friendly receptionist — staffers refer to themselves as “campers” — we were directed to a corner of the lobby where a Lifestyle Concierge helps guests with vacation activities. In addition to information about museums we hoped to visit, we learned about navigating transportation

systems, and what to discover in the surrounding neighborhood. (The hotel is a two-minute stroll from the central subway station and a pedestrian-only shopping area, and a 10-minute walk from the preserved medieval Old Town, Gamla Stan.)

A digital “Insider’s City Guide” offers tips from locals on hidden-gem hot spots for everything including overlooked museums, secondhand stores, quiet parks with water views, nightclubs, and street

food offerings. For those less digitally-inclined, the same information is included on a printed map, available in each room.

Additional hotel activities — many of them free — include yoga and stretch sessions, film nights in the onsite cinema, health tips from a training coach in the gym, walks led by staff members, and social fun runs.

The Nest cocktail lounge serves bar snacks and beverages.

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PHOTOS BY NECEE REGIS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

HERE

A NEW BOSTON 5K EVENT

Lace up your running shoes and head to the Esplanade for the Museum of Science, Boston’s inaugural Sci-K Fun Run, Oct. 6 at 9 a.m. The dog- and stroller-friendly event features a 5-kilometer run along the Charles River — a loop starting at the Esplanade’s Fiedler Field near the Hatch Shell — science-related activities, prizes, and music by the Hot 96.9 radio station. Thomas Grilk, CEO of the Boston Athletic Association, will announce the start of the run, which is open to all ages. Earn a prize for having the zaniest science-themed costume. Proceeds help provide free museum access for Massachusetts foster families, and funding for class field trips and overnight programs, with the aim to make STEM education available to all students. Entry fee \$35 for 13 and older, \$18 for 12 and younger. 617-723-2500, www.mos.org/sci-k

MAKE NOISE FOR POLITICAL CHANGE

Dozens of bands will take to the streets of Greater Boston to rouse political sentiment and instigate change. These social activist bands, which come from around the world, will perform in neighborhoods around Somerville, Cambridge, and Boston as part of the 14th annual HONK! Festival, Oct. 11-13. Keep an eye out for music-makers and revelers around Davis and Union squares in Somerville, Harvard Square in Cambridge, and Copley Square in Boston. Groups include everything from brass bands and a noise brigade to a stationary marching band and come from as far away as Germany and



Brazil. According to organizers, all bands follow a code of conduct and principles of unity. The free event happens rain or shine. 617-383-4665, www.honkfest.org

THERE

PEDAL ONTARIO'S NEW CYCLING TRAIL

The Lake Huron North Channel bike route just opened in northern Ontario, offering cyclists 280 miles of riding along quiet roads — perfect for fall foliage trips. The route, part of the province’s Great Lakes Waterfront Trail, follows 12 heritage rivers, connects 11 northern lakes, and passes through Amish and Mennonite farmland, alongside 24 beaches, and by historic logging, mining, and fishing villages. Start in Sault Ste. Marie at the Canada-US border and pedal east to Sudbury, stopping at inns and cottage resorts along the way, or do the route in reverse. The Great Lakes Waterfront Trail also offers more than 1,150 miles of signposted cycling routes,

with more than 135 miles of bike-friendly trails; an annual supported tour takes riders along sections of this trail each summer. www.waterfront-trail.org

THE GRAND CANYON'S HALLOWEEN-THEMED TRAIN

Hop aboard a train and get transported to a secret pumpkin patch near the Grand Canyon, where you can pick out your perfect gourd and wander around a hay maze. The new Grand Canyon Railway Pumpkin Patch Train takes passengers on roundtrip rides from Williams, Ariz. (about 30 miles



west of Flagstaff), to a clandestine pumpkin patch along the South Rim of Grand Canyon National Park. Trips run Saturdays and Sundays throughout October and take 90 minutes roundtrip. Once at the patch, visitors can wander around a kid-size maze, pick out a pumpkin for decorating, and explore the Colorado Shiver, a supposedly haunted train car. \$29 ages 16 and older, \$22 ages 2 to 15, includes train ride, one pumpkin per passenger, and admission to the haunted train. 800-843-8724, www.thetrain.com/events/pumpkin

EVERYWHERE

WATERPROOF WHEELING DUFFEL BAGS

Eagle Creek’s new Cargo Hauler Duffel bags work perfectly for fall and winter travel, when your luggage may sit on a rainy tarmac or get wheeled through slush and snow during your travels. They also have way more features than your standard duffel. These rugged, water-resistant bags have padded heavy-duty canvas bottoms, coated nylon tops and sides, and virtually impenetrable zippers that can be locked together for extra security. A zippered compartment on one end can hold shoes or dirty clothes separate from other gear (and Eagle Creek packing cubes help organize gear inside the cavernous main compartment). Use the backpack straps for carrying the bag, and then stash them in a zippered front



pocket for travel. The duffels have plenty of grab handles and also low-profile wheels that help with maneuverability — you just need a relatively full load to

keep the bag rolling smoothly, since the duffels don’t have a rigid back. Available in 40- to 130-liter capacity. \$99-\$189. 844-496-0404, www.eaglecreek.com

KEEP YOUR ENGINES RUNNING

Don’t get stuck with a dead battery or waiting for roadside assistance, especially as winter approaches. Scosche’s new PowerUp 700 can jump-start car, truck, and boat engines up to 10 cylinders, and also charge your smartphone, tablet, or other devices through its two USB ports. The 15,000 mAh battery stays charged for up to six months, and the unit’s spark-free design and safety protection system prevent the jump starter from overheating, overcharging, short circuiting, or causing damage if you reverse the polarity when attaching to your battery. An indicator tells you how much battery life is left and if the starter is ready to use and properly connected. The PowerUp 700 also has built-in light that can be set to solid, strobe, and SOS modes. The battery, charging cords, and small jumper cables come in an 8-by-6-inch case that easily stashes under a seat or in a small compartment. \$129.99. www.scosche.com

KARI BODNARCHUK

By Beth Jones

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

SVALBARD, Norway — It's true that polar bears outnumber people in Norway's Arctic archipelago of Svalbard. It's also true that the sun never sets in the summer. Six hundred miles from the North Pole, Svalbard is home to the northernmost human settlements on the planet and the sun doesn't set from late April through mid-August. Instead of sinking below the horizon, the sun moves in an ellipse, perpetually overhead and completely disorienting to anyone who's never experienced it. In the middle of June, midnight looks almost identical to noon. During the polar summer, many of the 2,300 residents of Longyearbyen, Svalbard's main settlement, cover their windows with reflective padding so they can sleep. The 3,000 polar bears are awake and roaming.

I entered this perpetual light in early June before sailing for two weeks around the archipelago's largest island of Spitsbergen on the *Antigua*, a three-masted, 50-meter schooner. My companions were 29 passengers from around the world, a crew of 11, a fearless female guide who's also a performance artist, and three experienced polar bear guards — all women — who have primary careers as a dancer, a creative writing instructor, and an employee at the local ionospheric radar center.

Svalbard is remote, a dot on the map, and almost off the map. An excellent piece of knowledge for a geography bee. But it's not nearly as remote as it used to be. As travelers seek the edges of a planet that's become more accessible, airline options have expanded and ships laden with passengers make their way north, into one of Earth's most fragile environments, with increasing frequency. Svalbard, like many other places — Bar Harbor in Maine for example — is trying to create a balance between protecting spectacular and endangered places while increasing the economy through tourism.

This intersection creates problems all too familiar to anyone who has watched the Discovery Channel. I saw piles of trashed fishing nets, huge dented buoys, Russian soda bottles, rusted cans, bird skeletons tangled in plastic bags, even a discarded television on a desolate beach. Cruise ships routinely dock in Longyearbyen with more passengers in one boat than all the residents of the archipelago combined. The *MSC Meraviglia*, an Italian ship, began visiting in 2018 and carries more than 6,000 passengers and crew, nearly three times the population of Svalbard. There are big questions about how to manage waste disposal, and in some parts of the Arctic, concentrations of microplastics are several orders of magnitude greater than in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. Research has indicated that cruise ship emissions are increasing air pollution around Svalbard.

But in this fragile environment, the beauty still overwhelms. There may be a question of how long this pristine place can last, but what I saw was, actually, breathtaking. There is some sort of crystalline magic in the far north, a testimony to the narrative of nature, and the urgency of ensuring that the polar parts of our world survive.

I arrived on a snowy, cold day to a town that was bustling. A huge passenger ship was anchored. Longyearbyen is in a valley, and I was staying at the much quieter top of the settlement, up a steep hill and just below the glacier Adventdalen, in a hostel that was once a coal miners' dorm. After checking in I walked down into the center of town, past a gallery with a collection of antique maps and contemporary paintings, an upscale restaurant and theater in what used to be the miners' community hall, the elementary school surrounded by polar bear fencing, and several condemned buildings that have become unstable because of the warming permafrost. Reindeer meandered across a hotel construction site.

Longyearbyen's center resembles a tiny ski town with a pedestrian mall housing high-end gear shops, gift kiosks, bars, cafes, a coop selling every-



In Norway, so much beauty — and fear of its demise



BETH JONES FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE



thing from car batteries to legs of lamb, and the “farthest north” cash machine, thrift store, public library, and chocolatier in the world. Mountains rise on three sides.

At one end of town is a Radisson hotel, and I stopped there to ask for directions to the Svalbard Museum. Inside, hundreds of cruise passengers sat at white clothed tables dining on a fusion-Thai lunch overlooking the jagged mountains, 8,000 miles from Bangkok. It was a surreal contrast to the icy quiet outside the hotel's lobby and felt oddly like I could have been in any small city in the world.

I did find the museum, and as Sander Solnes, the head conservator told me, “A settlement on mainland Norway of 2,000 people maybe has a gas station and a pizza joint. Here we have four or five fine-dining restaurants.”

The museum is impressive, and covers an extensive amount of geologic, natural, and human history. But Solnes's concern is far bigger than where to find a minke whale burger or a decent pad thai. Erosion is washing away archeological sites across Spitsbergen, and the melting permafrost is causing those that remain to deteriorate rapidly. “In the past, we could excavate only one to two feet in the ground during the summer, and now, it's thawing two or three times deeper,” he explained.

The contrast between the activity in Longyearbyen and the solitude across the rest of Svalbard is extreme. Svalbard is 23,560 square miles of high craggy mountains and icy glaciers that roll over silt and crevasses to calve into the sea. During summer, the fjords are such a radiant blue it seems impossible, and waterfalls run into rivers of

Clockwise (from top left): Walrus sighting in Sarstagen; Longyearbyen houses; the fjord Hornsund on Spitsbergen; glacier Fridtjovbreen in the bay of Fridtjovhamna; an abandoned coal mine on a slope above Longyearbyen.

meltwater. It's an otherworldly place of rocky moraine, spongy tundra that's soft as a featherbed, beaches strewn with icebergs, and glaciers so full of leafy fossils (from when Svalbard was close to the equator), it seems someone left them on purpose. The flora and fauna are out of fairy tales: polar bears, arctic foxes, reindeer, walrus, purple saxifrage, dwarf willow, psychedelic orange lichen. Arctic terns migrate every summer, flying nearly 25,000 miles north from Antarctica, and then, when winter begins to fall, they return south.

While there's no indigenous population, Svalbard has a long and complicated human history that started with whaling in the 1600s. The whale populations were decimated by the mid-1800s. Next came hunting and trapping of seal, walrus, and arctic fox. Eiderdown is still collected for luxury duvets. Mining followed, and while the industry was largely unprofitable, coal left its footprint. “Cultural heritage” in the form of wobbly wooden buildings, pylons, slag heaps, and rusting rail bins are visible across Longyearbyen and other parts of Spitsbergen. Two small mines are still operating, and one is phasing out.

My real introduction to Svalbard started the day after I arrived when I kayaked across a fjord from Longyearbyen to the base of steep, flat-topped Hjortfjellet mountain with a group of

four and a rifle-toting guide. We climbed to the summit in whiteout conditions, post-holing most of the way because spring was turning to summer and the snow was soft. We shared biscuits and tea huddled together in an ice storm, and half of me wondered why people lived in such a harsh place, while the other half was overcome by the beauty, even when we couldn't see past our own feet.

After two days in and around Longyearbyen, I joined 29 fellow passengers and we boarded the *Antigua*, a Dutch steel-hulled schooner with a broad deck, comfortable dining and lounge areas, and cabins that ranged from minuscule to spacious. The *Antigua* sails in Svalbard and Norway's Lofoten Islands from spring through New Year's, on trips lasting four to 14 days. I was traveling with a group of international artists and educators whose work relates to polar geography, landscapes, imagery, and climate.

After my first steely gray and bitter cold introduction to Svalbard, most of the two weeks we were on the boat were spectacularly sunny. Unusually so, according to our lead guide, Sarah Gerats.

We were surrounded by blue skies and deeper blue water. Icebergs ranged from clear as glass to turquoise and sapphire. There was so much beauty — 24-hours a day — that I never wanted to close my eyes. I became delirious from the scenery and the sleeplessness. We climbed the glacier Bloomstrandbreen, looking down into its eerie dark crevasses. We watched and listened as Meyerbreen glacier cracked and calved. We followed polar bears — at a distance — for hours as they swam and walked along the shoreline. We rode in zodiac boats to

remote beaches and stood close enough to walrus colonies that we could hear and smell them. We spent 17 tense hours stuck in pack ice west of Danskoya island, floating north with no navigation, after an electrical failure. I stood on an ice floe in the middle of the Arctic Ocean. We climbed the ship's masts, helped set sails, sat outside no matter the weather or time, because every moment the scene changed and every blink meant we might miss a pod of beluga, a puffin, the elusive narwhal, a spectacular angle of light. A few of us went swimming and in photos, there are icebergs drifting behind us.

We had a bonfire on the summer solstice at Eidembukta, on a rocky beach below mountains, with toasted pink marshmallows. The sun was so bright and warm that some of us stripped down to T-shirts.

We wore sunglasses day and night, and it was hard to believe that in winter, there is an equal amount of darkness. Light fades quickly in the fall, and Svalbard transforms into a dim frozen world covered entirely in ice and snow, lit by northern lights. We were told that until a few years ago, intrepid winter adventurers were able to walk across the polar sea from Svalbard to the North Pole. But that trek is no longer possible, because of rising sea temperatures and the water not freezing sufficiently.

Traveling by ship, and sailboats in particular, provides a sort of suspended animation. We were gliding along, then landing to hike, walk on the beaches, nap in the sun above glaciers, look at the relics of old mines or hunting cabins, and rolling back out to sea, temporarily released from the issues of the terra firma. Our captain and Gerats did an excellent job of navigating us away from nearly every other ship. We rarely saw anyone else, and then only at a distance across fjords.

But Svalbard's dilemmas follow on land or water. The lead article in the March 2019 edition of the *Barents Observer*, a daily on-line newspaper published in mainland Norway, announced 100 consecutive months of higher than average temperatures in Svalbard. When I talked to Solnes, the museum conservator, about the impact of climate on the environment and archeological sites around Svalbard, he shook his head and said, “We can agree or disagree about climate change but that's not interesting. It's happening.”

The archipelago is changing so swiftly that everyone — from the people who were raised there to recent arrivals — recognize the pace of transformation. “For a long time, Svalbard had three parts to its economy,” Gerats told me. “Mining, research, and coal. But as coal ends, tourism increases. And the shift to tourism is moving too fast.” She shook her head and added, “When those giant cruise ships show up, I go into my house and pull down the shades for four hours, until they leave.”

Tourism has taken center stage in Svalbard. Minke whale carpaccio is served with local permaculture microgreens. Svalbard Brewery uses 16 percent glacier water in all its beers. The Lompenseteret shopping mall sells pricey mukluk boots and mass-produced polar bear Christmas ornaments. The sleek bars could be in Oslo. There are dog sled rides, snowmobile trips up the glacier, (snowmobiles outnumber residents more than two-to-one), reindeer stew in a replica Sammi hut, and fossil hunting. The Svalbard Seed Bank is currently closed to visitors because of the melting permafrost.

My advice: Go to Svalbard now. It's a very strange experience to immediately, and simultaneously, fall in love with a place and also fear its demise. The complications of Svalbard, a far-away dot on the map, its tenuous hold, and the lack of control it has over how the rest of the world affects its future, are actually very close. And they broke my heart. But everything else on the archipelago filled me to bursting. Go now, or if you don't, be aware that by the time you get there it may have already changed.

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Playing with the concept of camping

►CAMPER
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With all these hip offerings, we expected to be the only boomers among a sea of millennials. At the morning breakfast buffet, an extensive spread of hot and cold choices (available until noon!), I was surprised to see people of all ages, including many families enjoying their summer holiday.

The creative services and bonhomous vibe make this 492-room hotel feel less like an anonymous complex of rooms and more like a chic boutique, albeit one that plays with the concept of camping. Decorated in soothing woody tones, rooms feature log-shaped night tables, comfortable reading nooks, cork

and pegboard wall hangings, and pendant lamps that mimic the warmth of a campfire. Some accommodations, like ours, feature a window seat overlooking the plaza; all include amenities such as a small refrigerator, television, kettle for coffee or tea, desk and chair, box for locking valuables, and free WiFi. Tiled bathrooms offer either a tub or shower. A new category of accommodations, “co-living suites,” operates more like an apartment than a traditional suite, with a central lounge and doors that connect to adjacent rooms that can host up to 12 guests — a creative solution for families traveling together or groups of friends.

Spacious business rooms include stress-reducing board games. A new business center wing, The Roots, recently opened with the same relaxed attitude, lounge, free WiFi, sustainable vegetarian cafe, and 13 flexible conference rooms.

My favorite place to hang was The Nest, a rooftop wellness area offering stunning views of the city's Old Town buildings and historic church spires, and a spacious sauna is designed to resemble a bird's nest. (Hence, the name.) Outside, a long and narrow heated pool is open year-round, in sun, rain, and snow, and is the perfect spot to enjoy a relaxing cocktail from the bar. Treatments include several do-it-yourself and guided skin rituals. A classic massage — Swedish, of course — can be scheduled. (Entry for hotel guests during entire stay, \$40, includes keepsake bathrobe.) The Nest Cocktail Lounge, serving bar snacks and beverages, is open to hotel guests and Stockholm locals. The lounge is adjacent to the pool and wellness area — with the same spectacular views — but does not allow access to those private sections.

As for dining, the first-floor Campfire

Grill & Bar is a casual and lively gathering spot for everyone in the city. Large windows overlook the plaza, and a copper-topped circular fireplace echoes the camping theme. The menu features locally-sourced vegan, vegetarian, gluten-free, and carnivore comfort foods such as venison short ribs, plant-based or beef burgers, and seafood tacos. The restaurant is so popular, in fact, that we couldn't dine in a timely manner without a reservation. No matter. It's a good reason to return.

Downtown Camper by Scandic, Brunkebergstorg 9, Stockholm. Doubles from \$173/night. +011-46-8-517-26300; www.scandichotels.com/hotels/sweden/stockholm/downtown-camper-by-scandic

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