

A thawing WILDERNESS

On a photography expedition to Svalbard, a remote Norwegian archipelago at the edge of the world, Justin Meneguzzi discovers a brutal, but fragile, wilderness.

I'm ensnared in the polar bear's stare. He has deep hazel eyes, and a bridge of powdered snow on the top of his black nose as he sniffs the air. Droplets of water are trickling down the fine hairs on his back. The mighty 'King of the Arctic' is just metres away, sizing me up, but I'm safely elevated above him at the bow of our ship. I meet his gaze through my camera. The shutter clicks, and the enormous carnivore tilts his head like a curious dog, revealing a side that I never expected to see.

Just moments ago, I was dining and chatting with my well-travelled fellow Arctic expeditioners, when a bell suddenly rang announcing we had an unexpected dinner guest. Cue a wave of flapping jackets and scattered cutlery as everyone – even the chefs – dashes to the bow, arriving in time to find the bear sniffing around the ship and trying to work out where that delicious smell is coming from.

It's only the beginning of our two-week voyage aboard the *Ocean Adventurer*, Quark Expeditions' newly refurbished expedition ship, circumnavigating the Svalbard

archipelago. This frigid cluster of islands, cast adrift in the Arctic Ocean between Norway and the North Pole, is famously known as the realm of the mighty polar bear, the star of any voyage into this unforgiving environment.

Capture the moment

Following the hubbub of the bear interrupting dinner, I meet with Sue Flood in the ship's plush lounge for a private photography masterclass. Usually found documenting the polar extremes of our planet alongside Sir David Attenborough, or working with BBC's prestigious Natural History Unit, Sue has joined our special photography-themed voyage as Quark's expert guest photography guide. Any trepidation I felt about meeting a Fellow of the Royal Photographic Society melted away when Sue began browsing my snaps, musing with general approval.

The trick in wildlife photography, Sue tells me, is to focus on the animal's eyes, which can convey so much drama and personality. But, more importantly, "try to develop your own style and always look for something different





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01 Polar bears spotted on a Quark Expeditions cruise © Michelle Sole
 02 A pair of walrus © Justin Meneguzzi
 03 Ethereal icebergs © David Merron
 04 High Arctic landscapes © Samantha Crimmin
 05 Reindeer are a common sight in this part of the world © Justin Meneguzzi

– like great behaviour, lighting or composition. What is it about the scene in front of you that is going to capture someone’s imagination and stop them in their tracks?”

Don’t be dissuaded if you don’t have a top-of-the-range camera, says Sue. She tells me she’s landed magazine covers with photos taken on her mobile phone, and that mobile technology has advanced to the point where anyone can experiment with photography.

In the High Arctic, you’re never lacking for experimental subjects. While cruising past Wilhemøya, another alarm blares at 2am and we emerge squinting in the unyielding sunlight to watch a bear crest a snow-covered hill and disappear again. At Edgeøya, we find great masses of walrus with bloodshot eyes seemingly nursing their hangovers on a beach. Swooping black guillemots make challenging target practice as they dive in and out of the ocean for fish. Meanwhile, wily Arctic foxes prowling for bird’s eggs keep keen-eyed photographers on their toes.

Environmental ambassadors

Back on board, time is divided between lots of eating (the Arctic burns a lot of calories), playing board games and editing photos. Come evening we settle in for a special presentation from our expert guides, then enjoy happy hour on the deck, hoping a whale might crash the party.

The ship is big enough to break away from the crowd, so I retreat to the quiet of the bridge and join our expedition guide, Todd Weisbrot, as he scans the water with his binoculars for signs of orcas, his favourite animal. Todd has worked as a guide for nearly a decade, and he believes polar tourism can be a powerful tool for conservation and awareness.

“The Arctic is a threatened area, but it’s also incredibly dynamic. This is where you see global warming happening, and the effects of melting ice caps and rising sea levels. Everything in this fragile ecosystem is connected, and removing just one element from it can see significant trickle-down effects,” says Todd. He tells me many travellers come here because they want to see the Arctic before it is gone; and the



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effects of human-caused climate change have been glaringly visible on our voyage.

We've seen remote beaches littered with fishing lines, plastic bags and Japanese soda cans, the result of circulating global ocean currents that bring trash to the Arctic. While cruising past the majestic Lilliehook Glacier, which has lost 40 per cent of its ice in the last century, we heard a thundercrack as an enormous chunk of ice calved from a glacier and plunged into the sea.

Todd interrupts my reverie by reaching for the ship's alarm bell. He's spotted something, but it's not an orca.

A frustrated mother bear is trying to hunt for seals from a hole in the sea ice while her two cubs gambol in the snow, their clumsy movements scaring off any potential prey. It's a precious reminder of what's in our care, and what's at stake. ♦

06 Humbling Arctic scenery © Justin Meneguzzi 07 Face-to-face with a polar bear © Justin Meneguzzi

Travel file

Information
quarkexpeditions.com

Getting there
 Norwegian Air and Scandinavian Airlines fly daily from Oslo to Longyearbyen, the main departure point for Svalbard expeditions. Flights are regularly cancelled due to wild weather, so allow extra days to arrive before your ship departs.

WHY DOES *the Arctic* MATTER?

As the need for climate action becomes more urgent, we explore how a thawing Arctic could change the planet.

Unlike Antarctica, which is a continental land mass at the southern end of the planet, the Arctic is an icy sea surrounded by eight countries, including Canada, Iceland, Russia and the United States. It's home to much-loved species like polar bears, puffins and reindeer, as well as nearly four million humans, including Indigenous communities.

Climate change is causing the Arctic to warm twice as fast as the global average, placing the livelihoods of humans and animals in the Arctic at risk. But a melting Arctic should be a cause for concern for all of us, even if we don't live there.

The Arctic's ice helps regulate the planet's temperature by acting as a giant white shield, reflecting the sun's rays back out into space. Less ice means less reflection, resulting in more heat being absorbed into our atmosphere. At the same time, warmer temperatures will cause greenhouse gases captured in Arctic permafrost to be released into the atmosphere. Both of these things can create a negative feedback loop that accelerates climate change.

A rapidly warming climate has been linked to the increased frequency of natural disasters in recent years, including the Black Summer bushfires that devastated Australia in the summer of 2019. Climate change also affects the crops on which our global food system depends. This instability means staples, like rice and wheat, could become more expensive, which is likely to hit vulnerable communities hardest.

A warmer atmosphere leads to greater acidification of our oceans, as well as the loss of sea ice in the Arctic. For marine mammals, like whales and polar bears, these changes pose a significant risk to their survival. Polar bears rely on sea ice to travel long distances, hunt for seals, and make dens for their cubs. At current rates, scientists predict sea ice could disappear entirely by 2035, with polar bears on track to experience reproductive failure by 2040 and become extinct by 2100.

Climate change is reversible, but the window for change is shrinking. By reducing carbon emissions today, we can help minimise the impacts on our fragile Arctic.

